THE 3 INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE CORN HUSK DOLLS

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A former employee of The Jones Salvage Yard turns up in Rocky Beach. He is getting married in Deep Spring, a sleepy and peaceful town in the Arizona desert, and he asks Jupiter, Pete and Bob to help with the wedding preparations. When the three boys arrive in the small town, they notice unusual happenings—the appearances of creepy corn husk dolls and gunshots in a cornfield. Soon, they learn of events pointing to a convicted criminal. The Three Investigators know they have to rush to solve the case in time to save the wedding.

The Three Investigators
in

The Mystery of the Corn Husk Dolls

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Translated, adapted, and edited from:

Die drei ??? und der Puppenmacher

(The Three ??? and the Doll Maker)

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(2023)

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(2023-04-04)

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1. A Friend Returns

Jupiter Jones had to blink against the bright morning sun as he stepped out of the Jones family home with a glass of orange juice in his hand.

He walked towards a small gate separating the house from The Jones Salvage Yard—a business that offered not only scrap and used items but all kinds of curiosities. It was operated by Jupiter's uncle Titus and aunt Mathilda, whom he had been living with since his parents had died in an accident many years ago.

There was nothing much going on in the grounds of the salvage yard. Aunt Mathilda was sitting in the office doing paperwork. Uncle Titus was nowhere to be seen, probably out on a shopping trip.

Jupe strolled across the dusty square to the secret headquarters of the investigation agency he had founded with his friends Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews. Headquarters was in an old mobile home trailer hidden under a pile of junk. Amidst this junk was also a man-sized discarded refrigerator which they called the 'Cold Gate', and it was a secret entrance to the trailer.

A note written in black felt-tip pen was taped to the Cold Gate. It said:

How time has flown.
Used to be two of us,
But now I come alone.
Who am I?

Frowning, Jupiter took off the note and opened the fridge door. The fridge was empty, but the back wall could be pushed aside using a hidden mechanism. Behind it, completely buried under scrap metal, was a short dark tunnel of corrugated sheet metal that led to the main entrance of the trailer.

Jupe opened the door of the trailer, and entered Headquarters. There, he saw Bob standing on a chair and wiping the top shelf of an emptied wall shelf with a damp cloth.

"Slept well?" Bob asked.

"We were just about to send out a wanted notice," said Pete, who was grimly busy cleaning the small sink. "Weren't we supposed to meet at ten o'clock to do some spring-cleaning in here?"

"Spring cleaning is good," Bob added. "Have we ever done that? And did you know that this shelf under the layer of dust is not grey at all, but brown?"

"Calm down, fellas. I'm here now. Tell me, did one of you see this message?" Jupiter showed his friends the note. "It was stuck on the door of the Cold Gate."

Bob and Pete shook their heads at the same time. "When we arrived ten minutes ago, there was nothing stuck there," Pete said.

"Maybe it was Aunt Mathilda," Jupiter murmured. "I'll ask her."

"Are you trying to avoid work?" asked Pete.

"No."

"We'll come with you," Bob decided and put the cleaning rag aside.

In the yard office, Jupiter's aunt was busy fiddling with an old calculator. The First Investigator stuck his head through the open door. "Good morning, Aunt Mathilda. Has anyone been here this morning?"

"Huh?" She didn't even look up from her work. "No. Oh, yes… That man… He left something for you."

"Was it this note that was taped on the old fridge?" Jupe asked, holding up the note.

"Yeah, yeah," Aunt Mathilda replied, again without looking up.

"So who gave this to you?"

"Well, it was a man. He came to me when I had just unlocked the office and pressed the note into my hand. He just said: 'For Jupiter Jones'. Then he left."

"What did he look like?"

Aunt Mathilda miskeyed a number and suppressed a curse. "How should he have looked like?"

"Was he tall? Short? Young? Old? Hair colour? Eye colour? Clothes? Unique features?"

"Huge…" Aunt Mathilda interrupted her nephew. "Tall… Blond… Eye colour? No idea… Lumberjack shirt. Is that enough? I really don't have time for your witness interrogation right now, Jupiter Jones. I'm in the middle of the monthly statement."

"It's all right," Jupiter muttered. When Aunt Mathilda was in a bad mood, it was better to avoid her.

Outside, Jupe held up the piece of paper again. Bob and Pete looked over his shoulder.

"So there were two of them…" Pete murmured.

"Aunt Mathilda described him as huge, tall, and blond," Jupe added.

"—But now only one of them came?" Bob pondered aloud. "I could think of someone."

"Me too!" Jupiter added. "Hans or Konrad Schmid!"

The First Investigator was referring to the two husky Bavarian brothers who had worked at the Jones Salvage Yard for years before returning to Germany some time ago. The Three Investigators had not seen them since.

"—But that doesn't make sense. Aunt Mathilda would have recognized him and—" Jupiter fell silent and looked at the note again more closely. "See how the black writing is fraying greenish at the edges? I know this pen. Uncle Titus uses it for the price tags he sticks on second-hand furniture." Smiling, he shook his head. "Aunt Mathilda actually fooled me, didn't she? Come along, fellas!"

This time they entered the office together, where Jupiter's aunt was still busy with the calculator—or at least pretended to be.

"Aunt Mathilda—gotcha!" said Jupiter.

"Excuse me?"

"You pretended not to know who the man was. I suspect that it was one of the Schmid brothers. I just don't know which one."

Mathilda Jones silently reached for the office phone and dialled a number. "The case is solved," she said.

A moment later, Uncle Titus's pick-up truck rolled through the driveway into the salvage yard. Apparently he had been waiting by the road for his wife to call.

Titus Jones got out and with him a hunky blond man in a plaid lumberjack shirt that stretched across his upper arms. Next to the broad-shouldered man, Uncle Titus looked downright tiny.

The unexpected visitor approached them with a grin. "Well, you three rascals!"

"Konrad!" The Three Investigators ran towards him.

“Jupiter Jones! I cannot believe it! You have grown up so much!” Konrad Schmid grabbed the First Investigator by the sides like a toddler and lifted him into the air, groaning. Jupiter gasped in fright and Bob and Pete burst into snorting laughter.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! I am very happy to see you three!” The big Bavarian set Jupiter down, who exhaled deeply.

“Well, this is a surprise!” Bob remarked. “What are you doing here?”

“Did Hans come as well?” asked Pete.

“No, he is in Germany.”

“So, first time back after so many years?” Bob asked.

“Konrad has been here… a few months ago,” Aunt Mathilda interrupted. “You three were in India with Mr Charles for that ruby thing.”

“This morning, I arrived in Los Angeles from Germany,” Konrad continued. “I wanted to surprise you so I asked Mrs Jones not to tell you I am coming. I made up that little riddle because I know you like puzzles—but I think it was too easy.”

“We still like to solve puzzles,” Bob said with a grin. “So you’ve been back here? How come?”

A broad smile stole across Konrad’s face. He gave Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus meaningful looks.

“We already know the reason,” Aunt Mathilda explained. “Come with us to the office. I have cherry pie for all of you.”

She shooed them like a flock of chickens to the yard office. Shortly afterwards, they all had a steaming cup of coffee and a piece of cherry pie in front of them and Konrad began to talk.

“Hans and I were back in Germany building our new life there. About a year ago, I missed California so I came here for a few days. Actually, I wanted to visit you then, but at the airport things turned out differently. I met someone—a woman.” Again he gave a broad smile. “There was a mix-up at baggage claim. She took my suitcase and I took hers, and I managed to contact her about it… Well, anyway, to cut a long story short, there was a—how you say—a spark between us.”

“Spark?” Bob wondered aloud.

“Yes, from then on, I went directly to her place in Arizona a lot—quite often. She lives on a farm there.”

Pete shook his head in mock reproach. “—And you haven’t visited us once.”

“I wanted!” Konrad affirmed. “Last time when I was here, you were away.”

“Just kidding,” Pete assured him with a grin. “Maybe you can come over more often in the future… or both of you. You and…”

“Tricia,” Konrad said pensively. “Her name is Tricia.”

“Isn’t such a long-distance relationship between Arizona and Germany quite expensive?” asked Uncle Titus, twirling his moustache thoughtfully.

“Don’t be so unromantic, Titus Jones!” Mathilda barked.

“But it is.”

“Yes,” Konrad confirmed. “That is why I am going to move in with her… because Tricia and I want to get married.”

“Well, that’s news,” said Pete. “Congratulations!”

“Thank you.”

“That means you’ll be leaving Germany again,” Jupiter stated. “What about Hans?”

“He stays there. He likes it there and not really missed coming back here as I do.”

“When will it be?” asked Bob. “The wedding, I mean.”

"A month from now. You are all invited."

"Oh, a wedding feast!" Aunt Mathilda clapped her hands enthusiastically.

"Very convenient, that's when we have holidays," Pete said.

"Good thing! I, uh, I want to ask you three if you can come a few days early to help us. We do not have much money for the party. Got lots of work to do at the farm. Some help would be very good… and you three are good boys."

"Sure," Bob said immediately. "As often as Hans and you have helped us, it goes without saying."

Konrad beamed. "Great! You will like the farm… and you will also like Tricia."

An old van drove into the yard. The driver pressed the horn briefly.

"That is Señor Fernandez," said Uncle Titus. "He's come for the boxes of books."

"You want me to help?" Konrad offered.

"Nothing doing," Aunt Mathilda said. "You're our guest and stay seated. With the good price we gave Señor Fernandez, he can load the boxes by himself." She rose. "I still have to talk to him for a moment."

Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus went out to meet the customer.

"Hokay, we are alone now," Konrad said in a lowered voice, "because I have something to ask you."

"Regarding the wedding preparations?" asked Bob.

"No. I want your help with another thing."

Jupiter listened up. "You mean you want to use our investigation services?"

Konrad nodded and leaned forward. "Something happened. Last week, a day before I left for Germany, I came back from shopping in Silverstone. That is the town near Deep Spring, where Tricia lives. I went into the farmhouse—to the kitchen—and there, I saw an intruder."

"An… intruder?" Bob wondered. "What did he look like?"

"He looked like a ghost!" Konrad said.

"A ghost?" Pete cleared his throat.

"When I came in, he had a tablecloth over his head looking like a ghost. Then he jumped out the window. I followed, but my foot caught the window frame and I fell down hard on the ground outside. When I got up, I saw him run into the cornfield in front of the house. I chased but could not find him."

"A cornfield?" asked the First Investigator. "Couldn't you follow his footprints there?"

"I did, but the guy was too far away. When I reached the road, he was already gone. Only the tablecloth was on the ground."

"Do you have any guesses as to who the intruder might have been?"

"No."

"—Or how he got into the house?"

"I guess through the same window," Konrad suspected. "It was just closed but not locked. Since then, I lock the windows before going out."

"What was stolen?" Bob interfered in the questioning. He had already pulled out his notepad and was taking notes.

"Nothing. It is strange."

"Or destroyed?"

"Nothing."

"That's very scanty information," the First Investigator remarked thoughtfully. "What about the footprints? Did you take a closer look at them? Or maybe even photographed them?"

“The… footprints?” repeated Konrad, clearing his throat sheepishly. “I forgot! There were tracks. I followed them, but… did not look closely. I am sorry. I really am a fool.”

“Nonsense,” Pete said conciliatory. “It would have happened to me too.”

“Of course not,” Konrad objected. “I know you three. I should have learned from your investigations.”

“Don’t worry about it, Konrad,” Jupiter said. “After all, if you could do everything on your own, you wouldn’t need us at all.”

“You will take the case and help me?”

“Sure,” Bob promised.

Konrad smiled and nodded with satisfaction. “I know you three are the right guys for the job.” His mobile phone began to beep. “My alarm. I have to go now.”

“You are leaving already?” wondered Pete. “You’ve only just arrived.”

Konrad looked down at the floor in embarrassment. “Yes, I am sorry, boys. I want to have more time here but I got a cheap train ticket to Arizona today. I have to go now to catch the train.”

“Too bad,” Bob said.

“I will see you again soon. Then you will get to know Tricia, the farm, and then we will celebrate!”

Konrad rose. “Hokay, I can count on you, right? Bring your gadgets… you know, magnifying glass and all that… whatever you use to investigate.”

Jupiter grinned. He didn’t know when he had last used a magnifying glass, but said: “We’ll bring our magnifying glass, I promise.”

Uncle Titus, who had finished his conversation with Señor Fernandez in the meantime, took Konrad to the train station in the pick-up. The Three Investigators waved after them until the pick-up was out of sight.

“Fellas,” Jupiter said, “this is a first for us.”

“Going to Arizona?” asked Pete. “Not true, we’ve been there before—”

“No, that we already have a new case—but can’t start investigating for another month.”

The Second Investigator sighed. “In other words, I know a month in advance that I can forget the idea of a quiet, relaxing summer holiday.”

Bob shook his head with a smile. “… As if we ever had a quiet, relaxing summer holiday.”

2. ‘Welcome to Deep Spring’

“We’ll be there soon.” Pete yawned heartily and looked out of the window. There was nothing to see there.

The train had been rushing through the darkness for hours, rarely stopping at small stations on its way to Flagstaff. Most of the passengers on the night train had long been asleep in their cabins. The Three Investigators, however, had normal seats. A sleeping cabin would not have been worth it if they arrived at half past two in the morning.

Bob startled out of a light slumber. “When do we have to get out?”

“In a minute.”

Bob groaned. “I had just fallen asleep. The night train was a stupid idea.”

“Calm down Bob, in an hour we’ll be in Tricia’s guest room ready to sleep.”

“An hour too much,” Bob muttered and yawned. “I hope she has decent beds.”

“I hope she’s nice,” Pete said.

An announcement heralded their imminent arrival at Deep Spring, Arizona. As the train slowed down, Pete braced himself from the fluffy seat and tugged their backpacks from the luggage rack.

Shortly, they stood in front of the hissing opening doors and got off. Cold air greeted them. On the deserted train station, a neon tube flickered above the door of a small office. Then, the train started moving again.

“No one here,” Bob noted as the red tail lights of the last carriage disappeared into the distance. Silence descended over the platform until all that could be heard was the hum of the faulty neon tube and the soft clicking of moths as they collided with the lamp.

“Konrad is supposed to pick us up,” Pete said. “Where is he?”

“He’s probably waiting for us by the road.” Jupiter shouldered his backpack and they circled the small station building to the car park. However, there was not a single vehicle there.

“There’s no one here either,” Pete remarked. He sat down shivering on the only bench far and wide and looked at the structures hanging under the canopy of the station building, swaying slightly in the wind. They were little dolls, made from the dried husk of corncobs held together with twine. On the wall, there was a framed poster that read:

Welcome to Deep Spring, Arizona!
Visit the Deep Spring Corn Festival in September.
Home is where the corn is!

Below was a drawing showing several of the same kind of dolls dancing in circles around a gigantic corncob that seemed insanely happy about being roasted over an open fire.

“Wow,” Pete said, not a bit impressed. “A corn festival. Let’s go there.”

“That’s not until autumn,” Bob told him.

“It was a joke, Bob. When a corn festival is the highlight of the year, you know you’ve reached the end of the world.”

Ten minutes later, they were still waiting.

“Strange,” Bob said, looking at his watch. “Konrad wouldn’t have fallen asleep, would he?”

“I’ll give him a call,” Jupiter said. No one answered.

“I hope nothing has happened,” Pete said worriedly. “Konrad is actually very reliable. You don’t have his girlfriend’s number, do you?”

“No, but I do have the address of her farm. We could set off on foot.”

“How about a taxi?” suggested the Second Investigator.

“Have you looked around yet? We’re in the middle of nowhere. Deep Spring has 2,988 residents. If one of them is a taxi driver, he’s long asleep.”

“Phew,” Bob groaned. “How far is it to Tricia’s farm?”

Jupiter looked at his mobile phone. “Five kilometres if we go down the road, but only three as the crow flies. That can be done in just under an hour.”

“As the crow flies means cross-country?”

“We have to cross this hill—Maze Hill. Don’t worry, it’s not very high. There’s a path as well.”

“I’m not really in the mood for it now,” Pete grumbled, “but it’s still better than sitting here and freezing.”

They straightened their backpacks and set off. The main street was deserted. Behind the windows of the few residential buildings near the train station, everything was dark. There were no cars anywhere. Only once did a raccoon scurry across the street. Fireflies hovered among the pine trees.

Between a vacant lot and an abandoned petrol station, a footpath led into the sandy wilderness. Yucca palms lined the path. The moon shone bright and clear on the craggy flanks of nearby Maze Hill.

Soon they were going uphill, fortunately not too steeply. They reached a plateau via a well-marked path. Here, man-sized boulders rose from the ground like spikes and piled up to form a peak. The monoliths leaned against each other, supporting each other and thus forming passages and small tunnels.

“‘Maze Hill Rock Maze’,” Bob read on a weathered information board. “‘Beware of falling rocks; Enter at your own risk.’ Do we have to go through there?”

“We don’t have to,” Jupe replied, “but it would be shorter. On the other side of the maze, we go down and then we’re almost there.”

“—But you can’t get lost in the maze, can you?” asked Pete.

Bob shook his head with a glance at the information board. “It’s a naturally formed maze and it’s not very big.”

It was actually not complicated, but nevertheless they came to a short dead end every now and then and had to turn back. Pete found it unpleasant to suddenly be surrounded by boulders after the climb under the open, wide sky. The boulders were located so close together in places that the boys almost had to squeeze between them.

“I thought you couldn’t get lost in here,” the Second Investigator remarked as they turned back for the fourth time.

“We won’t get lost,” Jupiter assured him. “We just occasionally hit the wrong—” He fell silent. A light had appeared in the rock passage in front of them. Someone was walking around there with a flashlight.

“Jupe, there’s someone there,” Pete whispered.

The First Investigator did not get a chance to answer because a glaring beam of light fell directly on his face and blinded him.

“Hey! You there! Freeze!”

“What do we do now?” hissed Pete.

“Who are you?” the stranger growled, coming closer. “What are you doing here?”

“We are going through the rock maze,” Jupiter answered soberly. “Would you please turn away the light and make yourself known?”

“Chief Holden of the Deep Spring Police Department,” the man said, continuing to shine directly into the eyes of the First Investigator.

“Sergeant Cooper!” he called over his shoulder to the rear. “Come here, I found the fellows! What have you got in your backpacks? Paint cans, am I right?”

“Clothes, washing things, holiday reading,” Jupiter calmly replied, “and a toothbrush. May I ask what you are accusing us of?”

“I ask the questions. Put your backpacks down!”

Jupiter, Pete and Bob complied with the order. Chief Holden stepped closer to examine the backpacks, but he didn’t get that far.

Suddenly, bright lightning flashed through the night, bathing the rocky landscape in flickering light. It was not a sudden thunderstorm that had broken over Maze Hill, but the source of the flickering seemed to be a spotlight somewhere on the hill above them.

“What’s going on here?” the chief shouted angrily and pointed his flashlight upwards.

Only now could the boys see the man clearly. He was around sixty, short, stocky and had a thick grey moustache. That was all they could make out because the light kept flickering. His movements seemed choppy.

“I’m getting dizzy,” Bob groaned. “Are we on a dance floor here?”

“Good comparison,” Jupiter said. “There could be a strobe light hidden up there somewhere… you know, those lamps that are commonly used in the event industry.”

“—But what does it—” Bob began.

“There you are at last, Cooper!” the chief called out.

A tall woman in a police cap approached through the rock passage. “Watch these three here! There must be a fourth. I’ll take care of him.”

“Aye, Chief,” the policewoman said and Holden pushed past her around the next corner.

By now, the flickering light was so hard on the eyes that the three boys had to lower their gaze. Only Sergeant Cooper did not let herself be disturbed. She softened the flickering effect by pointing her flashlight at the surrounding rocks. “Wait a minute,” she said, “aren’t you—”

A suppressed curse cut her off.

“Chief!” the policewoman shouted but no one answered.

“Goodness!” she hissed. “You guys don’t move, you hear me?” She pulled her gun out of the holster, disappeared around the next bend and simply left The Three Investigators standing there.

“What’s going on, Jupe?” whispered Bob as he fought his dizziness and tried to ignore the flickering light—until all at once it went out. Having been so blinded earlier, they now saw nothing at all.

“Chief?” echoed Sergeant Cooper’s voice from the rock walls. “Holden, where are you?”

The answer was a muffled groan.

The boys heard footsteps behind them. A dark figure with a backpack stumbled out from between the rocks and froze when he noticed The Three Investigators.

The figure then turned and ran away.

“After him!” Pete shouted and reflexively started to move. He got three metres before he bumped into a knee-high rock he hadn’t seen. “Ow!”

“What happened?” asked Bob.

“Goodness!” Pete pressed out with a groan. “I just can’t see anything.”

“We should not move from here,” Bob suggested.

“We could turn in a fugitive perpetrator who allegedly knocked down a police officer,” Jupiter indicated.

“All right,” Bob relented. “After him!”

They took up the pursuit, but after more clashes with the rock walls and two wrong turns, they realized it was hopeless.

“It’s not going to work,” Bob admitted. “This guy obviously knows his way around. We don’t.”

“You think it was a man?” Jupiter asked.

“Okay, it could have been a woman.”

Suddenly Chief Holden stood in front of them. This time he held a gun in his hand. “That’s enough of you brats. Hands up!”

“Sir, we are most certainly innocent,” Jupiter affirmed. “We don’t even know what we are accused of.”

“You can put all that on record at the police station. Hands up, I say.”

The Three Investigators followed the order.

“Your names?”

“Jupiter Jones, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews.”

“And who was the fourth in the group?”

“This person is unknown to us.”

Chief Holden snorted. “Can you show me some ID?”

“That won’t be necessary, Chief,” said Sergeant Cooper, who came up behind Holden at that moment. “They’re telling the truth. You see, these three are my guests from Rocky Beach. Am I right?”

“Tricia?” asked Jupiter frowning and hesitantly putting his hands down.

“That’s right,” the sergeant confirmed. “Chief, this is all a big misunderstanding. These three are coming to my place. They are friends of Konrad’s and are helping with the wedding preparations.”

“Konrad didn’t say anything about you being a police officer,” Pete commented.

She shrugged her shoulders with a smile and held out her hand to them. “I’m Tricia.”

Chief Holden still did not seem convinced. “And what about the fourth? The one who ran away?”

“Could you see beyond doubt that it was a man, or is that just conjecture?” Jupiter asked.

“Now don’t get rude, boy.”

“That was not my intention.”

“Relax, Chief,” Tricia said. “Number four is out of the woods by now anyway. Were you attacked? I heard you scream.”

“No, I hit my head on a stupid ledge.” He rubbed his forehead and finally put his gun away.

“What about the flickering light?” asked Tricia.

“It could have been one of those disco spotlights. It was suddenly gone.”

“We also saw the individual briefly,” Jupiter said.

“The individual?” the police chief repeated, looking at Jupiter as if he were from another planet.

“He was carrying a backpack,” the First Investigator continued impassively, “and he probably had a headlamp.”

“Should be a night party up here, I guess,” Holden growled.

"—Which wouldn't be illegal, Chief," Tricia said. "But tell me, you three, why are you roaming Maze Hill in the middle of the night?"

"Konrad was supposed to pick us up at the train station," Jupiter explained. "Since he didn't show up, we set off on foot. The shortest route from the train station to your farm is over the hill."

"That's right, and I can explain why Konrad wasn't there. He told me the train would arrive at half past two—in the afternoon! We weren't expecting you until then."

"So merely a misunderstanding," Jupiter stated.

They picked up their backpacks and followed Tricia and the chief.

"And why were you up here?" asked Bob.

"There was an anonymous call at the station," Holden explained. "Supposedly someone was up to no good in the rock maze. We've seen that before. Usually it's some youngsters spraying the rocks with their so-called art. I would have loved to have caught one of them."

They stepped around a corner and were suddenly out of the maze. Now they were on the other side of the plateau where there was a small car park. A police car was parked there.

"Put your backpacks in the boot," Holden said. "We'll take you to the farm. Come on, let's go."

Waiting in the car was a tan-coloured Labrador Retriever who jumped towards Tricia with joyful excitement.

"Calm down, Trigger. Get back in there!"

Shortly afterwards, the police car rolled down a stony track to the main road. From there it was only a short distance to a dirt road that led past a cornfield to an old farmhouse that lay dark and silent.

"I'll take you in quickly and show you to your room," Tricia said.

"One more thing," Chief Holden said, raising an admonishing index finger. "Next time a police officer tells you to stay put, you'll do what?"

"Then we won't move?" Pete suggested timidly.

"Exactly, young friend." Holden lowered his finger and pointed it at Pete. "Then you don't move."

"Then we won't move," Bob repeated, nodding dutifully.

"There… and you're off now, Cooper. The night shift is over for you. Take care of your guests before they cause any more commotion."

Jupiter cleared his throat. "Excuse me, sir, but I would like to point out that it was not us who caused the commotion."

"You don't know when enough is enough either, do you? Off to bed, you three, and on the double!"

"Thank you, Chief," Tricia said.

"That's all right. I'll get through the last few hours without you… or do you think another bank will be robbed tonight in Deep Spring?"

"Deep Spring doesn't have a bank at all, Chief."

"Exactly. I'll see you the day after tomorrow." He nodded at her, got into the car and drove off.

While Trigger ran excitedly from one to the other, sniffing trouser legs and wagging his tail, Tricia smiled at The Three Investigators and then said: "Welcome to the Cooper farm. I'm really sorry we left you at the train station in the middle of the night. All this trouble right now makes me very uncomfortable."

"It's not you," Pete assured me. "No matter where we show up—it usually doesn't take long for some drama to happen."

Tricia laughed. “Konrad already mentioned something like that. You are investigators, aren’t you? Well, I can’t wait to see what other dramas await us.”

“Please don’t say that too loudly,” Pete added. “You might regret it.”

3. Another Break-in

When Bob woke up, it was as bright as day. Blinking, he opened his eyes. He was lying on a mattress on the floor in the guest room on the upper floor. He glanced over to an old bed and a discarded sofa in the room. Both were empty, so Pete and Jupiter were already up. He looked at the clock. It was almost noon.

Bob got up and stretched. In shorts and a T-shirt, he climbed down the stairs to the ground floor of the farmhouse. The furniture was old and the carpets on the floor were tattered and faded. Dust danced in the sun that fell through the windows. Voices could be heard from outside. He opened the door to the verandah and was greeted by glaring sunlight.

Bob saw a richly laid breakfast table where Jupiter, Pete and Tricia were already sitting. Trigger lay at Tricia's feet and looked up briefly before panting and putting his head back on his front legs.

"Third in line," Tricia said. "Good morning!"

"Well, it's almost lunchtime," Bob muttered, wearily running his hand over his face.

"Hi, Bob," Pete said good-humouredly.

Jupiter just nodded at him. He was chewing on a large piece of doughnut.

"Sit down. Do you like coffee? It's very fresh." Tricia pointed to a silver flask.

Bob took a seat and poured himself a glass of orange juice. Then he let his gaze wander.

The old farmhouse stood in the middle of nowhere. To the south, uncultivated farmland spread out in dry ground where scrawny desert plants held their own against the scorching sun. To the right of the house was a paddock where a brown horse stood in the shade of some pine trees. Next to it was a stable with three old bicycles leaning against the wall. On the left, a little way away, there was a large barn that looked as if it was at least a hundred years old. A small hatch under the roof rattled softly in the wind.

Tricia's property was surrounded by a dilapidated wooden fence. To the north, not far away, lay the cornfield they had driven past last night. Beyond the field, Maze Hill loomed out of the landscape. From a distance, the boulders on its summit looked as if a giant had strewn a handful of stones across the hill.

The town of Deep Spring was not visible, although it could not have been far away. Only another farmhouse stood a little way away on its own large, lushly landscaped plot.

"Nice here," Bob said.

"Isn't it? This is where I grew up. After my parents separated, I lived with my mother in Flagstaff. Then my father died and I returned here to the farm. However, I gave up farming. It wasn't for me. Silver is the only one I kept." She gestured to horse on the paddock.

"I can understand that," Bob said. "By the way, where is Konrad? Is he still asleep?"

Tricia laughed. "No, he was already out running errands when I woke up. There is so much to prepare for the wedding and I am immensely grateful to you for sacrificing part of your holiday to help us. I have so few holidays and hardly any time to take care of anything. Besides, Konrad can't do everything by himself. Even my strong Bavarian can't do that. Look! Speak of the devil…"

At the end of the dirt road leading to the main road, the dust cloud of an approaching vehicle rose. A dirty white pick-up truck was heading for the farm. It rolled through the open

gate and stopped in front of the verandah.

Konrad got out and stared at the boys, aghast. “Jupe, Pete, Bob, you are here already? The train came early?”

“No, the train arrived at Deep Spring at 2:32 am on the dot,” Jupiter said with a grin and cleared up the misunderstanding for Konrad.

“You arrived in the middle of the night?”

“We called, but your phone was probably switched off.”

Konrad shook his head. “Dead zone! No reception in the house. I should have told you that. So sorry. How did you guys get here?”

“On foot,” Bob explained. “It was a bit adventurous.”

“We were arrested,” Pete said, “by Tricia—well, almost… otherwise it was fine.”

“What?”

Tricia laughed. “Sit down with us, Konrad, and have a coffee. Then we’ll tell you everything.”

The tall Bavarian quickly brought his shopping into the house, then listened in amazement to the report of what had happened during the night. “Where did that light come from?”

“Probably just some teenagers who wanted to party up there,” Tricia speculated. “We probably scared them away.”

“A party without music?” asked Jupiter doubtfully. “And without guests? After all, we only saw one person. I find that rather strange.”

The First Investigator looked towards Maze Hill and Pete knew exactly what was going on in his friend’s mind. Jupiter was not prepared to let last night’s mysterious occurrences go.

“Whenever you say ‘strange’ I get a little scared. We’re here for another reason, remember? The wedding preparations… and on top of that, the ‘ghost’. We really don’t need another mission.”

Konrad banged the table leg so hard that the dishes clinked and the coffee in the cups spilled over. “Oh, sorry. Me and my long legs again.”

“You’ve only had them since yesterday,” Tricia said with a grin. “What kind of ghost?”

“Pete means a… a school project,” Konrad said.

Tricia did not see the shock in his eyes only because she was in the process of wiping away a puddle of coffee with her napkin.

“A school project about ghosts?”

“That’s what Pete calls it,” Jupiter replied before the Second Investigator could say anything. “Our task over the holidays is to look into the regional myths and legends at our holiday destination. Pete thinks mainly of ghosts, which is probably due to his personality structure.”

Jupiter said this so calmly and casually that Pete could only add a puzzled “Uh, right”.

“Interesting,” Tricia thought, but without really listening. The puddle of coffee that had spread under the breakfast plates demanded her full attention.

A phone rang in the house. Tricia sighed and rolled her eyes. “That’s probably my mum again.”

“You go,” Konrad said. “I will clean up.”

“What was that about?” asked Pete after Tricia had entered the house, but Konrad put a forefinger to his lips.

“The phone is in the hallway,” he murmured.

When Tricia spoke on the phone, her voice was clearly audible outside on the verandah.

“Hi, Mum! … No, you don’t need to make dessert. Nigel will take care of that… What do you think? Tiramisu for forty-seven people? … Why forty-nine? … You invited Uncle Carl and Aunt Ruth? Mum! We talked about this…”

Konrad quickly wiped away the last coffee stains, then went to the end of the verandah where a hammock was stretched out and motioned for the boys to follow him. Here, Tricia’s phone conversation could only be heard as a murmur.

“Tricia doesn’t know about the break-in,” Konrad whispered.

“We just realized that,” Bob said. “Why not?”

“I don’t want her to worry. She had so much stress. Her mother was sick and Tricia had to go to Flagstaff many times… and also, there is the wedding.”

“But she’s a police officer, Konrad,” Pete interjected.

“Yes, exactly. She works too much. After the night shift, she is on duty again tomorrow until the wedding. She has enough to do. If you can solve the case, she won’t have to know about the break-ins.”

“The break-ins?” Jupiter listened up. “There were more than one?”

“Yes, I am going to tell you.” Konrad shook his head in confusion. “Well… I think there was a second break-in.”

“What do you mean you think?” asked Bob.

“I didn’t see the person. Nothing was stolen… But last Wednesday, Tricia asked me if I had been in her yoga room. That is her little private room upstairs at the end of the corridor. The door is always locked, but that day she thought someone went in there.”

“Why?” asked Jupiter. “Was the door open? Or was something taken?”

“She didn’t say. She just asked if it was me. It wasn’t, but I remembered the tablecloth ghost, so I looked around and I found signs of break-in at the kitchen window. Although it was locked, someone forced it open. The latch is old and not good. I quickly repaired it and painted over the damaged wood so Tricia wouldn’t notice. There were also footprints outside.”

“So the intruder may have returned,” Bob remarked. “Does Tricia keep anything valuable in her yoga room?”

“I do not know.”

“And the footprints?” asked Jupiter hesitantly.

Konrad grinned broadly. “I remembered this time.” He proudly pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket.

“Very good!” praised the First Investigator, looking at the display at the distinct profile of a shoe sole made up of intertwined circles. “A very clean print. You’re lucky. They appear to be sneakers.”

“These are not just any sneakers,” Pete clarified. “These are the Summer Splash Limited Edition by Tiger.”

Bob blinked. “The what?”

“Summer Splash Limited Edition by Tiger—the shoe brand. I wanted a pair myself, but they were sold out everywhere very quickly.”

“And how do you know that?” asked Jupiter.

Pete shook his head uncomprehendingly. “It’s a trademarked sole design.”

“I see. Well, unfortunately we can’t ask Tricia if she knows anyone with shoes like that, because we don’t want her to know about the break-ins.” Jupe sighed. “It’s not ideal conditions for investigations if we can’t even question the alleged break-in victim about the crime. So Konrad, do you really think it’s wise not to tell Tricia?”

“After the wedding, you can tell her. Before that, she does not have to know anything.”

The verandah door swung open. Tricia stepped outside and asked: “What don’t you want me to know about?”

“Trish!” gasped Konrad, startled. “You—”

“Eavesdrop? I wouldn’t dare. I know how dangerous it can be for a bride to be too curious just before the wedding. Possibly one or two surprises would be spoiled.” She winked at her fiancé.

Konrad cleared his throat. “I am explaining to the boys what else to do.”

“Of course,” Tricia said and dropped into the hammock.

“So, you three… over there is the barn where we want to hold the wedding. It still has to be cleared out. I’ve already done a lot, but we didn’t want to just throw all the old stuff out as rubbish, but rather find people who can still do something with it. That takes time. That’s why it’s still not completely empty.

“We also need electricity for the lighting and the music… and decorations… and tables and chairs and tablecloths and crockery and cutlery. We can borrow these from the parish hall. We need to get the drinks and a fridge. You can help me with a lot of things.”

“We’ll manage,” Bob said confidently before turning to Tricia, who looked exhausted. “Are you all right?”

She sighed. “My mum calls five times a day, and she always has a new surprise for me. The day before yesterday, she wanted to take over the decoration of the barn; yesterday she wanted to engage a great solo entertainer who was supposed to provide snappy music with guitar and harmonica; and today she suddenly comes around the corner with Uncle Carl and Aunt Ruth. This time she has her way. The two of them are coming. There are now forty-nine of us.”

“Don’t worry, Trish!” laughed Konrad. “When I go to Mrs Harper to get the lanterns, I will ask her if she can give us a few more chairs. I also ask Mrs Oldman if she can rent her spare room. My cousin Anna is coming and needs a place to stay. You three boys, you can go look around a bit. Deep Spring is a small town, but… you can find something to do.” Konrad gave them a long look before he went to the pick-up truck.

The next moment, an old Ford approached and stopped in front of the house. Under the yellowish layer of dust, it was probably light blue.

A young man got out. He was in his early twenties, medium height, a little pale, had a friendly but unobtrusive face and wore a cap that said ‘The Roadhouse’. Uncertainly, he looked over at the verandah.

“That’s Nigel,” Tricia said. “He works at the diner and does the catering for us.” Tricia waved at him, just as the phone rang again. “It’s probably my mum again,” she groaned and went into the house to answer the call.

“What’s up, Nigel?” asked Konrad.

“I w-wanted to talk to Tricia, actually,” Nigel said, looking at Tricia going into the house. “About the wings.”

Konrad raised his eyebrows.

“Chicken w-wings, I mean. I c-could maybe bake them crispy with s-s-salt and pepper… b-but I hope I am not interrupting h-her.”

“You can also talk to me about the food,” Konrad said.

“Wedding preparations,” Pete said, rising from the table. “Come on, fellas, we’ll clear away breakfast.”

“Agreed, and afterwards we’ll have a look around Deep Spring. Before that, maybe a little walk?” Jupiter looked at Maze Hill.

Pete sighed. “It figures.”

The Three Investigators carried everything into the house. While Bob and Pete loaded the dishwasher, Jupiter examined the kitchen window. He realized that he could only see the painted-over spot if he knew it was there. The wooden frame was very slightly dented in one place on the outside. Other than that, the First Investigator did not find any other traces.

4. Shots in the Cornfield

When they set off, Maze Hill was bathed in golden light. The Three Investigators left the farm, walked along the dirt road to the main road and then turned to the path that led up Maze Hill. The climb up was more strenuous in the heat of the afternoon than it had been the night before. Only when they reached the plateau could they catch their breath a little in the shade of the boulders.

"Do you think that will do any good?" asked Bob. "Looking around here, I mean?"

"Maybe we'll find a trace of the perpetrator from last night."

"The perpetrator?" Pete repeated. "—But there was no crime."

"There was no obvious crime at first sight," corrected the First Investigator. "But the act, namely lighting up the rock maze with a strobe light, is strange enough to attract my attention. Apart from that, we have quite a magnificent view from up here."

"As if you ever cared about magnificent views," Pete muttered, but left it at that, because Jupiter was right.

A distance away, the houses of Deep Spring lay like thrown puzzle pieces on the yellow plain. Tricia's farm was one of those pieces at the far edge, where civilization was already fraying. The cornfield and the neighbouring farm formed the last green bastion before the desert spread to the nearby foothills of the Hualapai Mountains.

The Three Investigators entered the rock maze. In the daylight, it seemed small and clear. After only a few minutes, they had explored every passage and every nook and cranny.

Then Bob made a discovery. "Look, there on the flat boulder."

The boulder Bob was referring to was covered in a thin layer of dust in which a footprint was clearly visible.

"Well, well, well," Jupiter said after looking at the trail more closely.

"The Summer Splash Limited Edition," Pete noted. "Not as clearly visible as in Konrad's photo, but clear nonetheless."

"This is exceedingly revealing," the First Investigator thought. "First another break-in at the Cooper farm, then the flickering light at night on a nearby hill peak. In a place as small as Deep Spring, the probability of a causal connection between two extraordinary events taking place within a short time is greater than the probability of coincidence… and here we have our first proof of that."

"The break-ins and the flickering light are connected," Bob interpreted with a sideways glance at Pete.

"I understood that," the Second Investigator replied. "I'm not stupid. What I don't understand is why Jupe needs to say a simple thing in a complicated way. Please don't answer that, Jupe. It was a rhetorical question. That means I don't expect an answer. Yes, you're amazed, aren't you?"

Jupiter grinned and made an inviting hand gesture towards the boulder. "Would you be so kind, Pete?"

"You want me to go up there?"

"The flickering light came from above… and this footprint proves that someone was climbing around here."

“Well, I’ll go up and check.” Pete climbed onto the boulder and from there onto the next one. He found more tracks. “Mr Summer Splash definitely climbed up here.”

“Anything else?”

“You mean a DJ booth or something? No. But… what is this?” Pete crouched down and picked something up. He returned to his friends and showed them the find.

“A corn husk doll,” Bob said, “like one of those dolls that hang outside the train station entrance.”

“Not quite,” Pete objected. “Just look at this.”

The doll depicted an emaciated, almost skeletal girl in a tattered dress. Her painted facial features were distorted into a silent scream.

“The dolls at the train station were much simpler,” Jupiter noted. “They consisted only of a torso, head, arms and legs. This one wears a dress made of corn leaves and has a face.”

Pete found the dead grimace that had been given to the doll creepy. “Who makes something like that?”

“Maybe the stranger from last night,” Bob mused. “Do you think he lost this doll?”

“It’s possible.” Pete looked at the doll more closely and bent its body back and forth. It didn’t feel like there was anything hidden inside it. However, he did not want to take it apart to check.

“Why would anyone take a doll made of corn husk to a lonely party with no music?” asked Bob.

“Let’s put a question mark on this first,” Jupiter suggested and put the doll in his backpack.

Pete rolled his eyes. “Can we go back to the farm then?”

“We were supposed to look around in Deep Spring,” reminded Bob.

“—But that’s quite a distance away,” Pete argued. “We could also go back to the farm first, preferably straight through the cornfield, and borrow the old bikes that are next to the horse stable.”

“Agreed,” Jupiter said and they made their way back.

Downhill, they made fast progress. As soon as they entered the field, their view was limited on both sides by corn stalks. The boys pushed aside the rustling leaves and moved as if through a narrow corridor. Not far away, several crows cawed now and then and fluttered their wings nervously. However, the birds could not be seen.

“We should be out of this cornfield in a minute—” Pete started but he did not get any further, because a deafening bang shattered the silence.

The three boys ducked instinctively and held their hands protectively over their heads. Around them, crows fluttered up, cawing loudly.

“What was that?” asked Bob, startled.

“Someone was shooting!” hissed Pete.

“At us?” Bob wondered.

“Unlikely,” whispered Jupiter. “Who would have seen us entering the cornfield?”

“Do you think someone is targeting the crows and doesn’t even know we’re here?” Pete wondered.

“Then we should make our presence known,” Bob said. “Otherwise we’ll be accidentally __”

A second shot rang out. A few metres away, the corn stalks trembled as if they had been hit by a bullet.

“That came from there!” shouted Pete.

“Don’t shoot!” shouted Bob.

The Three Investigators ran blindly. The corn leaves hit them in the face and more than once they stumbled. The third shot shredded a few plants a few metres behind them.

"Faster!" shouted Pete.

A moment later, they stumbled out of the cornfield onto the dirt road that led to the Cooper farm. On the other side of the path was a pasture fence. Behind this fence stood a scowling slim man in blue overalls. He was clean-shaven, his medium blond hair was thin and stood a little tangled off his head. He held his rifle ready to fire.

"Not so fast, you tramps."

"Please don't hurt us," Pete pleaded.

"Who are you? I suppose you are with Miss Cooper, but you're now on my property. That is trespassing. You're lucky I didn't put a bullet in you."

"You shot at us on purpose?" asked Jupiter.

"No. Past you… otherwise you'll be lying dead in the cornfield."

"This could have gone very wrong, sir."

"Sir?" the man mimicked the First Investigator. "Don't think you can get away by being polite, lad."

"You couldn't see us and could have easily hit us."

"—And it would have been my right to shoot you. I was defending my property."

"In the first place, we did not intend to trespass onto your property," Jupiter replied coolly.

"So tell me, what you are doing in my cornfield?" the man asked.

"We just wanted to take a shortcut."

"There are no shortcuts here. Access to the Cooper farm is only by this dirt road, as Miss Cooper knows very well. All the land around it belongs to me."

At that moment, Tricia's white pick-up truck rolled up the same dirt road. It stopped beside them and Konrad got out. "Mr Rice," he said loudly. "You got a problem?"

"Of course I have a problem, Mr Schmid. These criminals here, who I suppose are your guests, are prowling on my land."

"These three are not criminals, Mr Rice. Be peaceful."

"I've been peaceful long enough, but I'm getting fed up. Miss Cooper thinks she can get away with anything because she's a police officer. Even the police are subject to the law."

"Hokay, hokay," Konrad said simply. "Let's go, boys."

It was only a short distance to the farm, but the boys jumped onto the cargo area of the pick-up truck anyway, trying to get away as quickly as possible.

"Have a good day, Mr Rice!" Konrad yelled as he hopped into the driver's seat.

"I'm warning you, Schmid! One more misstep—"

They no longer heard how his threat ended, because Konrad simply drove off.

By the time they reached the farmhouse, Mr Rice was no longer in sight.

"An unpleasant contemporary," Jupiter muttered as he got off from the truck.

"What's his problem?" Bob asked Konrad.

"Rice lives over there…" Konrad pointed to the other farm that could be seen from here. Unlike Tricia's house, the building was new, big, and swanky, and surrounded by lush lawns that surely needed plenty of watering in this climate.

"Mr Rice owns most of the land here," Konrad continued. "He buys up the land bit by bit. Tricia's property is the last plot of land he does not own. He wanted it, but Tricia does not want to sell. She wants to stay here, so they argue all the time. I forgot to tell you guys to stay on the path away from Mr Rice. I'm sorry."

"It's all right," said Bob. "We survived it after all."

They helped Konrad unload the chairs and the boxes of lanterns he had received from Mrs Harper and placed them in front of the barn.

"I have to pick up Tricia from Silverstone. Something about the wedding dress. You boys wait for dinner later."

"How about we do the cooking then?" offered Bob.

"Great! Thank you."

"Can we maybe use the bikes over there?" asked Pete.

"Sure, I fixed them up for you."

"One more thing," Jupiter said, pulling the doll out of his backpack. "Does this look familiar to you?"

"Corn husk doll," Konrad said. "They are everywhere. Deep Spring is proud of its corn. Why, I don't know. Even the kids at school learn how to make these dolls."

"To this artistic extent?" Pete remarked. "It's so creepy!"

"Oh, all shapes, colours and sizes," Konrad waved it off without looking closely at the doll. "See you later!" He got into the truck and drove off.

Without wasting time, The Three Investigators took the bicycles and cycled the distance to Deep Spring.

Konrad had not exaggerated… or understated. There wasn't much in the town. A small supermarket, a petrol station, a bar called Hardy's and the diner called 'The Roadhouse' where Nigel worked had settled around the central intersection.

After ten minutes, they had seen everything. They bought a few small things for dinner and rode back.

They made macaroni with cheese sauce, and it was ready just in time when Konrad and Tricia returned. After dinner, they played cards on the verandah, but it didn't last long. Everyone was tired and went to bed early.

Bob felt as if he had just fallen asleep when a shrill woke him. Downstairs the phone rang. "Tricia's mum has some nerve," he mumbled sleepily. Someone answered the call and Bob fell back asleep.

Then the phone rang again.

"What is going on?" Bob looked at his watch. It was ten past one. His curiosity won out over his tiredness. "I'll go and see."

He stuck his head out the door and heard Tricia's voice from downstairs.

"—Who are you? … What do you want? Listen, if you call here again in the middle of the night—" She didn't finish the sentence, but slammed the handset down.

Bob stepped into the hallway and went down the stairs.

Tricia and Konrad were both standing in the living room. "Bob," Tricia said wearily when she noticed him. "Did the phone wake you up? Sorry."

"Did something happen?" Bob asked.

"No. Some weirdo," Konrad growled angrily. "Go back to bed, Bob."

Bob nodded and was already turning around when the phone rang again.

"I don't believe it!" Konrad cursed and wanted to reach for the handset, snorting with rage.

Bob intervened with his hand. "May I?"

Konrad shrugged his shoulders. "Hokay, just tell him off!"

Bob picked up the phone and held it to his ear. "Hello?" He had intended to sound determined and demanding, but all that came out was a timid huff.

At the other end, he heard someone breathing. No gasping or panting, no threatening growls or eerie sighs. The person at the other end was breathing calmly. As if he merely

wanted to make it clear that he was listening but would say nothing—that he was there… and could call again at any time.

5. The Hanged Bride and Groom

"Slept well?" Pete asked when Bob stepped onto the verandah the next morning. Once again, Jupiter, Pete and Tricia were already up.

Bob nodded wearily. "Is Konrad out already?"

"Since sunrise," Tricia confirmed.

"He was even back in between bringing these," Pete said, pointing to a lush bouquet of flowers on the table.

"Wow, what is that?" Bob asked. They were roses he had never seen before. Each petal glowed in a different colour.

"Rainbow roses," Tricia explained. "My favourite flowers. Actually, they are ordinary white roses having their stems draw up coloured dyes. They look great, don't they?"

"Today is Tricia's birthday," Jupiter said.

Bob stumbled. "Excuse me? How come we didn't know that?"

Tricia made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "Because I asked Konrad not to tell you. The wedding is in three days. I wanted to throw the birthday under the bus but Konrad couldn't resist. Oh, well. I'm happy with the flowers."

"Congratulations then," Bob said, "but we have nothing for you."

"Yes, you do. You are helping with the preparations. It's a great present. It's the barn's turn today and there's gonna be a lot of work. Sorry about the late-night disturbance, by the way."

"What kind of disturbance?" Jupiter pricked up his ears.

"You really slept like two sacks of flour, didn't you?" Bob remarked. Then he enlightened his friends about the incident with the caller.

"Has something like that happened before?" asked Jupiter.

"No, it was the first time," Tricia replied, "and hopefully the last."

"Do you have any idea who that might have been?" Jupe continued to probe.

Tricia shrugged her shoulders and yawned. "Some idiot… but Konrad eventually just pulled the plug out of the wall and then it was quiet." She stood up. "I'm going to take a quick shower. Before I go to work, I'm supposed to look in the barn. Konrad put a little surprise there earlier. I'm curious."

While Tricia was in the bathroom, the three boys finished their breakfast in peace and then changed into work clothes. Then they left the house and strolled towards the barn. The barn door banged lightly in the wind.

Suddenly it was closed from the inside with a jerk.

"Did you see that?" asked Pete.

Bob nodded. "That should be Tricia. She wanted to see Konrad's surprise, didn't she?"

Pete reached for the door but could not open it. "Locked," he noted, and then pounded against the cracked wood. "Tricia? It's us."

No one answered.

Pete rattled the door. "Hello? Tricia?"

"Shhh!" Bob whispered. "Do you hear that?"

The Three Investigators listened. A soft whimper came from the barn.

“That’s Trigger,” Pete noted.

“Is he locked up in there?” asked Bob.

Pete shook his head. “Tricia just closed the door, didn’t she?”

“But why doesn’t she open it for us?” Bob added.

The First Investigator put his finger to his lips. “It may not be Tricia at all,” he whispered. “Bob, stay here at the entrance! Pete and I will circle the barn. Maybe there’s an opening at the back. I’ll go left, you go right.”

They split up and reached the back at the same time. There was no back door. Pete pulled Jupiter to a finger-width gap in the wall. Jupiter peered through but saw only an old tractor in the dim light. Trigger’s yelp could still be heard. They returned to Bob.

“Anything?” whispered Bob.

“Nothing,” Pete replied.

“I’m sure someone is in there,” Bob insisted.

“Without a doubt,” Jupe agreed, “and that someone has to come out sooner or later.”

They waited by the stacked chairs and boxes of lanterns in the shade of a stunted mesquite tree.

“What if it is Tricia after all and something has happened to her?” whispered Pete. “She could have fallen or—”

“Shhh!” Jupiter hissed, because he had heard footsteps.

The barn door opened. Tricia and Trigger came out. Tricia had headphones in her ears and was seemingly bobbing to music.

“Hello, Tricia,” Jupiter said as he stepped out from behind the boxes.

Tricia winced. “You scared me.”

“Didn’t you hear us?”

She pulled out her headphones. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, your headphones,” Jupe said. “We rattled the door. Trigger whined. We thought something had happened. Did you lock yourself in?”

Tricia waved it off. “The door gets stuck sometimes… and Trigger probably whimpered because he saw a mouse or something. Anyway, I’ve got to get a move on, guys. Have a nice day!”

She hurried to the house.

“Strange,” Jupiter murmured as he watched her go.

“She seemed a bit erratic, didn’t she?” asked Bob. “… And pale.”

“Her hair was all dusty and messy,” Pete remarked, “and she had just been in the bathroom.”

“You have overlooked the crucial detail—her headphones,” Jupe added. “Tricia had her mobile phone in her pocket, but the headphone cable was not plugged in. She’s not telling us everything.” Jupiter lowered his voice. “I’m going to follow her. You guys look around in there while I’m gone.”

Bob and Pete entered the barn. Through the cracks and the not-quite-closed hatch under the roof, bronze sunlight entered, illuminating the floating dust. Farm equipment stood around that had not been used for a long time. There were also discarded furniture, a few bales of hay, boxes with unknown contents and the tractor that Jupiter had already seen through the gap in the wall. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust. No one was here.

Pete walked past the tractor and winced. Behind the vehicle, several objects were dangling under the ceiling beams. “Look, Bob! Corn husk dolls!”

They hung from the beams in several bundles of about a dozen each and were like the simple designs they had already seen at the train station. Two dolls, however, hung

separately. They were somewhat larger and more elaborately designed. One wore a dress; and the other, a tailcoat. It left no doubt as to what they were supposed to represent.

"A bride and groom," Bob said, looking at the figures.

"I don't know, Bob," Pete murmured uneasily. "I don't like it."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you see how they dangle up there? They each have a noose around their necks. Someone has… hanged these dolls!"

Jupiter entered the farmhouse as quietly as possible and listened. He heard footsteps upstairs.

The First Investigator crept up the stairs. The door at the end of the corridor was ajar. It was Tricia's yoga room, which was situated next to the guest room that the boys occupied.

Jupiter crept to the door of the guest room and took a quick peek into the yoga room, Tricia was in there with her back to the ajar door. The First Investigator saw her swallowing something and then taking a gulp of water from a water bottle. A moment later, she turned and noticed him.

"I should put on sturdy shoes," the First Investigator lied and opened the door to the guest room. "—Otherwise I'll hurt myself on a rusty nail. Are you all right? You look pale."

"I… yes… no. I don't feel well. All of a sudden. Kind of… miserable." She held her stomach.

"Oh? Did you eat something wrong?"

"I don't know—maybe just a stomach ache." She hurried past him down the stairs. "I'd better call the police station right away and let them know I can't come."

Jupiter nodded in understanding. He heard Tricia disappear downstairs into the bathroom. Then he entered the guest room and put on different shoes so that Tricia would not suspect anything.

"Anything?" asked Pete after Jupiter had returned to the barn.

"Tricia is not well… so she says. She's taking the day off."

"Not well?" Pete wondered. "But there was no sign of that at breakfast."

"Right." Jupiter opened and closed the barn door a few times. "The door isn't stuck either, as Tricia claimed. It works perfectly."

"Why would she lie to us?" asked Pete.

"Good question, Pete. It seems she did something in here that she didn't want to be seen doing. We almost witnessed what happened, which I suppose was why she quickly closed and locked the barn door."

"What about her sudden nausea?" Pete asked.

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. "Anyway, she swallowed some kind of medication, if I saw correctly."

"Maybe it has something to do with that," Bob said, pointing to the two large corn husk dolls.

The First Investigator looked at them closely. "Is this Konrad's work or have they been hanging here earlier?" He pinched his lower lip thoughtfully. "Something's going on here… and I don't just mean the intruder breaking in. I'm sure Tricia has not told us everything. Fellas, it seems to me that—"

"Don't say it!" Pete interjected.

"We have a case."

"You shouldn't say it."

“It wouldn’t have changed anything.”

“I’m not sure about that, Jupe. Sometimes I think that phrase is a kind of incantation. You conjure up new cases.”

“Don’t be silly, Pete.”

“Look! We don’t have time for a new case at all,” Pete argued. “We have to turn this barn into a banquet hall.”

“Surely these are the best prerequisites for getting to the bottom of the mysteries of this place.” Jupiter stretched out his arm and took the two bride and groom dolls out of the woodwork.

Suddenly Tricia was standing in the doorway.

“Oh hi, Tricia,” Pete said. “How are you? We were just about to start clearing out.”

She nodded. “That’s why I’m here. Would you take those things off?” She waved her hand in the direction of the dolls without looking directly at them. “Stow them somewhere where I won’t have to see them anymore.”

“We will,” Pete promised.

“What are those things… anyway?” Jupiter seized the opportunity. “—And where do they come from?”

“Corn husk dolls,” Tricia said. “Konrad’s surprise. I don’t know what he was thinking. I’m going to go lie down for a while. See you guys later.”

Almost in a hurry, she left the barn.

6. The Heroine of Deep Spring

The boys set to work. Although Konrad had claimed that he had already done quite a bit, there was still more to do than expected.

It took almost an hour just to manoeuvre the tractor. It wouldn't start at first, but finally they managed to get it outside without demolishing half the barn. Some of the boxes and cartons were heavier than expected and the hay bales were tremendously bulky. Ropes and chains still hung in every nook and cranny, or piles of rusty ploughs, harrows and other farm equipment. The discarded cupboards and shelves were full of tools and sacks of old seed, and shovels, rakes and scythes stood and lay everywhere.

What at first had looked like a job for an hour or two turned out to be a day-long event. They first hauled the things outside and then to the back of the barn where they would not be in anyone's way.

When they had emptied the barn a good half, Pete grabbed an old folding ladder and climbed up to take down the rest of the corn husk dolls. The Three Investigators examined them closely but found nothing unusual. Finally, they put the dolls in a box.

It was already evening when they joined forces to move outside the last large piece of furniture—a heavy farm cupboard.

Konrad came back with the pick-up and had brought an ice-cold Coke for everyone.

"This is just the thing," Bob said gratefully. "We've just finished."

"Thank you, boys," Konrad said. "I would not be able to do this on my own."

"Tell me, Konrad," Pete asked. "What's the idea of hanging the two large dolls in that way?"

"What two large dolls?" Konrad wondered.

"You have the little dolls, and then the two large ones—the bride and groom dolls," Pete explained.

"What are you talking about?" Konrad replied. "I put up the dolls as decorations for the wedding—all same sized dolls—little ones. I got them from Mr Hardy. He said they were all from the last corn festival. There were no large dolls."

"Really?" Pete remarked. "Then you've got to see this for yourself. Come!"

Pete and Bob led Konrad into the barn to the box where they stored the corn husk dolls they removed from the beams. Pete took out the two large ones and handed them to Konrad.

"*Du meine Güte!*" Konrad called out in astonishment. "I have never seen these two dolls before."

"It's not only just that," Bob took over. "It was the manner they were put up on the beam above."

"What do you mean?" Konrad asked.

"They were hung up with nooses around their necks… like this…" Bob said and held up the two dolls by their nooses.

"What?" Konrad gasped. "And did Tricia see this?"

"I'm sure she has," Pete replied, "and after she came out of the barn, she looked pretty erratic. Later she came back and asked us to take down all the dolls."

"Then I have to go and explain this to her right away," Konrad decided.

"Yes, I think that is a good idea," Bob agreed.

"Maybe this will help…" Konrad held up a shopping bag. "We're having a little barbecue for her birthday tonight, even though she doesn't want to celebrate. See you later." Konrad went into the farmhouse.

While their sweat dried, The Three Investigators calmly drank their Coke in the shade of the mesquite tree and then went to take a shower.

Jupiter was the last to finish. As he stepped out onto the verandah with his hair still damp, ambient music was playing softly from a small portable audio player.

Bob and Pete were leaning on the verandah railing, gazing pensively at the colourful horizon. Konrad stood at the spherical grill in front of the house firing up the coals, and Tricia had made herself comfortable in the hammock. The colour had returned to her face. She seemed to be feeling better.

An antique motorbike bumped along the dirt road and came to a halt with its engine banging. Trigger, who had been lying wearily on the verandah, jumped up and ran excitedly towards the unexpected visitor. A young woman dismounted, pulled her helmet off her dark short hair and greeted the dog.

"Katie," Tricia said, getting out of the hammock. "What are you doing here?"

"Are you kidding me?" Katie reached into the pocket of her leather jacket and pulled out a tiny packet, which she tossed to Tricia. She caught it deftly and shook her head reproachfully. Then she descended the stairs and hugged her friend.

"Happy birthday," Katie said with a grin.

"This is my best friend Katie." Tricia introduced the three boys.

"—And best colleague," Katie added. "Also known as Officer Parker. So you must be the three boys from California. Chief Holden told me about your little adventure that night. Sounded fun. Would have loved to have been there."

Katie was immediately likeable to The Three Investigators. She chatted freely about all sorts of things and had some funny anecdotes from the police station in store.

Soon a cloud of dust announced more visitors.

"Here you always know half an hour in advance that someone is coming," Pete remarked.

This time it was a police car. Chief Holden got out accompanied by a younger man who was also wearing a police uniform. He was a little taller than the chief, but much slimmer.

"Our very conscientious colleague Sergeant Murray," Katie explained murmuring. "Twenty-five years on the force and therefore our next chief as soon as he gets promoted and Holden retires… and I've been waiting twenty-five years to see him smile."

"You've only been at it for five years," Tricia said reprovingly. "Murray's all right. A bit too dutiful, maybe."

"Don't worry, I'll be gone in a minute," Holden called out, "but it has come to my attention that someone here is trying to shirk… from the responsibility of accepting congratulations."

Holden stepped up to the verandah and placed a six-pack of beer on the wooden railing from below. "Sergeant Cooper, the Deep Spring Police Department wishes you well."

"From me too," said Sergeant Murray. "Are you feeling better?"

Tricia nodded. "All is well again, Sergeant. Thank you."

"I hope so," said Holden, "because we can't do without you. Listen, you are, after all, the heroine of Deep Spring." He turned to The Three Investigators. "Did she tell you why some people here call her that? I bet not."

Tricia waved it off. "I'm just doing my job."

"You see—far too modest. You were definitely doing more than your job then, Cooper."

“The Johnson thing was an impressive performance,” agreed Sergeant Murray.

“Now stop that old story,” Tricia asked, opening the six-pack. She seemed uncomfortable with the subject. “You want a beer too, Chief? Sergeant?”

“On duty?” asked Murray reproachfully, shaking his head.

“Don’t change the subject, Cooper,” Holden said sternly and then turned to The Three Investigators. “The Johnson case was the one that earned Cooper her first promotion. It was a few years back. Geronimo Johnson was a violent criminal. Now, in retrospect, I think we should have figured it out a lot sooner. Johnson, after all, was always a strange character. He’s the guy who made those corn husk dolls that hang all over Deep Spring.”

Jupiter listened up. “Really?”

Holden nodded. “The simple ones were mostly made by primary school pupils… but Johnson made elaborate dolls. He put clothes and scary faces on them and called it art. If that’s art, then—”

“If that’s our topic of conversation now, I’m not toasting you, Chief,” Tricia intervened. She raised her water glass. “Well?”

Holden cleared his throat. “You’re right, Cooper. Happy birthday.” He toasted her with a beer bottle, but put it back unopened. “By the way, Parker, I’m on duty and have to go right back to the station where you’re relieving me in an hour. Have a good evening everyone.”

Holden and Murray got back into their car and drove away.

“That topic was unnecessary,” Tricia muttered. It had been intended for Katie, but The Three Investigators heard it anyway.

“Holden is just mighty proud of you,” Katie said comfortingly.

“Holden is not the only one,” Konrad said and pressed a kiss to Tricia’s cheek. “Hokay, steaks are ready! Who wants some?”

Half an hour later, everyone had eaten their fill. Only Trigger was still chewing on a bone. On the western horizon, the last bit of twilight had given way to the black of night.

Tricia stacked the plates to carry them into the kitchen.

“Nothing doing,” Katie said. “It’s your birthday, even if you don’t want to admit it. The boys are here to clean up.”

“Sure,” Bob said and stood up.

“You and I are going to take a little walk before I have to go to work,” Katie continued, pulling Tricia off the verandah by the arm. Trigger let go of his bone and followed them.

Bob, Pete and Jupe nodded conspiratorially at each other. Bob picked up the stack of plates and said: “I can’t handle this dishwasher, Konrad.”

“Wait! I will show you!”

The two went into the house.

“This is the opportunity,” Jupiter murmured. “Katie is Tricia’s best friend. If Tricia wants to talk to anyone about what happened in the barn today, it’s her.” Jupiter was already halfway down the verandah steps.

“We shouldn’t eavesdrop on our hostess,” Pete said hesitantly. “It’s just not proper.”

“I agree with you in principle… but her behaviour is more than suspicious and we have a job to do. I’m going after these two now. Come with me or don’t.”

Pete went along.

Tricia and Katie had gone to the barn and sat on one of the hay bales the boys had dragged outside that afternoon.

“If we make a wide arc, they won’t see us,” Jupiter whispered and circled the building.

Then they heard a soft sobbing. Tricia was crying. Close to the barn wall, Pete and Jupiter moved a little nearer.

“I understand why you are upset,” Katie said sympathetically. “You sounded so desperate when you called in sick. I knew something was wrong right away, but it doesn’t have to mean anything, Trish.”

Tricia swallowed another sob. “You’re right. Thank you for coming even though I asked you not to. I feel better now.”

“I know.”

Trigger trotted around the corner, spotted Pete and Jupiter and came towards them wagging his tail. Pete tried to shoo him away, but the dog thought it was a game and only wagged harder.

Katie sighed. “Are you sure you don’t want to tell Konrad?”

“Are you crazy?”

“I just thought honesty is the best policy. After all, you are getting married.”

“As long as it doesn’t happen again, he doesn’t need to know. Everything is fine the way it is.”

Trigger pricked up his ears and turned his head as if he sensed something. Suddenly, he darted past Tricia and Katie and under the fence that bordered the property.

“What’s wrong with your dog?” asked Katie.

“He’s spotted something,” Tricia replied. “A raccoon, maybe.”

Trigger plunged into the cornfield with a leap and was gone.

“Trigger!” cried Tricia. “Come here!”

There was a rustling in the corn and the stalks trembled.

“That would be a big raccoon,” Katie said worriedly. “Someone’s hiding there! Do you think it’s your lovely neighbour? Hey, Mr Rice! Have you lost something? Want us to help you look?”

There was a little rustling in the cornfield, then silence. Tricia and Katie went to the pasture fence.

“Come on, Pete,” Jupe murmured. “This is the opportunity to approach the scene without creating a moment of suspicion.”

“Agreed, if I assume you mean to sneak to the other side of the barn so no one notices.”

They circled the building again and pretended to come from the farmhouse.

“What happened?” asked Jupiter. “Did Trigger run away?”

Tricia shook her head. “He won’t just run away. Trigger!” She whistled on two fingers and waited. Three seconds later, the dog shot out from between the corn stalks and ran back to Tricia. “What’s the matter, dear? Did you track someone down?”

“Nothing is moving in the field anymore,” Pete noted.

“That had to be Rice,” Katie was convinced. “—Wanting to spy a bit on what his favourite neighbour was up to. What an idiot. Have a good evening, Mr Rice!” She glanced at her watch. “I have to go, my night shift is about to start.”

The two women and Trigger returned to the verandah.

“I’d like to know if it was really him,” Jupiter murmured and leaned over the fence.

“Don’t do that, Jupe,” Pete warned. “I’m sure he’s got his rifle with him again.”

“He wouldn’t dare shoot because it could get him in trouble.” Jupiter climbed over the fence and entered the cornfield at the spot where Trigger had disappeared.

“Jupe, come back!” hissed Pete.

“In a minute,” the First Investigator replied and followed Trigger’s paw prints to a spot where the ground was churned up. A clear footprint was not visible this time. Instead, Jupiter found something else. He picked it up, went back to Pete and showed him his find.

The Second Investigator looked at him questioningly. “A bunch of flowers?”

"Not just any flowers but rainbow roses," Jupiter commented.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That someone else wanted to give her these?"

"Oh… and who? Pray tell."

"Let's ask Tricia."

When they reached the farmhouse, Katie just rode off waving on her rattling motorbike.

"Look, Tricia," Jupiter said, holding the bouquet out to her. "They were in the cornfield."

"Flowers?" she wondered.

Pete winked. "Do you think they're from Mr Rice?"

Bob and Konrad stepped out of the house.

"Where did they come from all of a sudden?" asked Konrad.

"Someone was roaming around in the cornfield and dropped it when Trigger scared him off," Jupiter explained. "Does that mean anything to you, Tricia?"

She shook her head silently.

"But they're rainbow roses," Konrad said. "Your favourite flowers, Trish." He looked at her searchingly. "Do you have a secret admirer?"

The question sounded like a joke, but no one missed the worried undertone.

"Just one," Tricia replied with a wink, kissed Konrad and fled into the house.

An hour later, The Three Investigators gathered in the guest room and discussed in whispers.

"Something is going on here."

"Jupe, you've said that before," Pete said.

"The thing in the barn this morning… Tricia didn't show her face all day after that. Her behaviour is more than strange. Unfortunately, her conversation with Katie was not very informative. Only one thing we know for sure now—she's hiding something… and now this bouquet of flowers."

"Maybe she really does have a secret admirer," Pete pondered.

"Even so," said Bob. "Do you want us to get involved? I mean—we're here to get the barn ready for the wedding—possibly to clear up the intruder break-in. This flower thing is none of our business."

"What about the Johnson story?" asked Jupiter. "It was very revealing what Chief Holden said there, wasn't it? Tricia once confronted a criminal who was known for making corn husk dolls—elaborate dolls—as Holden put it… like this…" He picked up the creepy doll that Pete had found on Maze Hill. "—And Tricia was extremely uncomfortable with it being talked about. She really stifled the conversation."

"I noticed that too," Bob murmured.

"She's just modest," Pete countered. "She was uncomfortable with Holden praising her to the skies while her colleagues stood by. You see connections where there are none."

"We should at least put an investigator on this story."

"Can we engaged someone else to do that?" Pete asked. "We still have lots to do in the barn."

"Very funny."

The ringing of the telephone silenced them. They listened. Someone answered downstairs.

"Hello?" said Konrad. "Who is this? … Hello?" After a few seconds, he hung up angrily. "That lunatic again," they heard him curse.

The unknown caller called again half an hour later. Konrad did not let it come to a third time as he pulled the plug beforehand.

7. Gossips from The Roadhouse

When The Three Investigators got up the next morning, Tricia's shift had already started. The boys also had work waiting for them again. Konrad needed help picking up more chairs and tables, buying drinks and getting tablecloths, crockery and cutlery. The barn also needed electricity and lights. The boys drew lots to see who did what. Jupiter went with Konrad.

Bob and Pete spent the whole morning laying metres of cables and multiple plugs in the barn. They also set up the DJ booth in one corner. Then they spent an hour climbing around the beams to hang the lanterns and the colourful disco spotlights. Following that, they tested the lights so that they didn't dazzle too much. By lunchtime, their stomachs were rumbling.

"I don't feel like eating sandwiches," Bob said. "Shall we cycle to the diner and have something to eat there?"

"Agreed. Who knows when Jupe and Konrad will be back?"

The Roadhouse was a typical diner with a long counter and red upholstered seating niches at the window front. These were half occupied by customers with plates of juicy steaks or burgers in front of them.

A lean man with white stubble sat at the counter and stirred a cup of coffee, lost in thought. On the walls were old black-and-white photographs from the time when Arizona was still the Wild West. In one corner was an old jukebox draped with corn husk dolls. A Dolly Parton single was playing. When Pete and Bob stepped up to the counter, Bob spotted another doll perched on a lamp hanging above it.

"Hello, you two pretties," a stocky woman in her fifties with short curly red hair greeted them. "I'm Mary. What can I get you? We have ribs on offer today with a cashew nut crust." She pronounced the last words as if they were a foreign language.

"M-macadamia nuts," someone said behind her. Nigel peered out from the hatch to the kitchen. He wore a white paper cap on his head. When his gaze fell on the two boys, he seemed startled for a brief moment. "It's you… uh… hi."

Pete waved casually. "Hi, Nigel."

"You know each other?" asked Mary in surprise. "Oh, then you must be the boys from California who are staying with Tricia and her fiancé."

"Yes, indeed," Bob replied. "How did you know?"

"We are in Deep Spring. Word travels fast here. Nigel is our little kitchen professor—always coming up with a new invention. Sometimes he forgets that we're here in Arizona and not in France, but it is still a good idea to hire him."

"Ribs with macadamia sounds good," Pete thought. "I'll take it."

"Me too," Bob said.

"C-coming up," Nigel replied and disappeared back into the kitchen.

"How are the wedding preparations going?" Mary asked.

"Everything is fine," Bob answered evasively.

Mary was obviously Deep Spring's eyes and ears and was well-informed about everything. Bob supposed that it was part of her job. However, he did not want to provide her with gossip from the Cooper farm. Instead, he had the inspiration to turn the tables. He

pretended to just discover the corn husk doll on the lamp and looked at it more closely. The doll represented a rock musician. The frayed fibres of the corn leaves formed a wild mane of hair and even the guitar was folded from a corn leaf. “What’s this all about anyway? We saw these dolls everywhere in Deep Spring.”

“These are corn husk dolls—an old tradition in these parts,” Mary explained. “Don’t ask me why. At some point, I guess someone thought: ‘If Deep Spring has nothing else to offer, let’s make the ugliest thing with the most abundant material we can find to be our mascot.’ Since then, the residents of Deep Spring have been hanging these corn husk dolls on every lamp post, in every window, on every tree and everywhere in general. After all, our fabled Corn Festival attracts tourists from all over the world every year with unique attractions like sack races and pony rides.”

“You’re forgetting the most important thing, Mary,” said the lean man at the counter, who hadn’t even looked up yet. He turned to Bob. “That’s not just any doll, but a Johnson doll.”

“The boys won’t care about that, Scott,” Mary countered.

“How do you know that? After all, they are Tricia’s guests, and I bet she didn’t tell them the story.”

“What kind of story?” Bob wanted to know.

Mary started to interfere, but at that moment a customer wanted to pay. “Don’t tell the boys horror stories, Scott,” she admonished, raising her index finger threateningly before reluctantly taking care of the bill.

Scott waved Bob and Pete over. “Now, boys,” he said. “Listen carefully. It was a few years ago there was a robbery in the middle of Deep Spring. The robber broke into poor Cordelia Williams’s house, who was still living in the old mansion on Washington Drive at the time. She had the misfortune to be at home. He knocked her down and robbed the mansion. Valuable jewellery, gold watch—all gone. Our Chief Holden was in the dark. He found a DNA trail, but he had no suspect to match it with. No wonder. Holden only has jurisdiction over Deep Spring, and no one from here could be the perpetrator.”

“Why not?” asked Bob.

Scott looked at him crossly. “Because only decent people live in Deep Spring, that’s why.”

“Of course,” Mary said sarcastically as she walked past them with the bill in her hand. “Deep Spring is paradise and everyone elsewhere is evil. You’re talking stupid again, Scott.”

“But that’s what happened,” the old man defended himself. “The county sheriff is responsible for the surrounding area, but he apparently had better things to do than to search for the perpetrator… and that’s where Tricia Cooper comes in, fresh from Flagstaff. She got stuck into the case and collected DNA traces in her spare time. She picked coffee cups out of petrol station bins and sent cutlery from diners in the area, including here, to the lab. This went on for months until one lead finally turned out to be a match… and it led to Geronimo Johnson.”

“The doll maker,” Bob said.

Scott raised his eyebrows in surprise. “So you do know.”

“You called the doll a ‘Johnson doll’ earlier,” Pete interjected. “So this Johnson guy made dolls like that?”

Scott nodded. “Corn husk dolls like this.” He pointed at the rock musician. “I don’t even know why this one is still sitting on the lamp. That’s the devil’s stuff.

“Johnson was a crazy man. He has tattoos on his face, an upside-down cross under his right eye… and is a drug addict—a junkie. Who knows what else he was up to in his house in

the wasteland. You don't even want to imagine. You don't find people like that in Deep Spring."

"He lived in Thunder," Mary interjected on her way back to the counter.

"—And not in Deep Spring," Scott insisted. "He sold his dolls at the Corn Festival and at the Silverstone Farmers Market to earn money for his stuff. Anyway, that wasn't enough, so he robbed Cordelia Williams. She was over seventy by then and had to go to hospital. I went to see her. She was all green and blue. Johnson's a monster. When he was arrested, he went crazy and swore revenge. He was even foaming at the mouth."

"Besides, he's grown horns and wings," Mary added mockingly.

"You have no idea, Mary."

"And where is Johnson now?" Bob asked further.

"Where he belongs—in prison, of course. He got eight years, the rascal. He still has two to go. Far too little. It could have been life for all I care. If he ever comes back, he'd better not show his face around here. He won't get another foot on the ground in this town, I swear to you."

"In any case, it's remarkable that Tricia solved the case virtually single-handedly," Pete tried to dissuade Scott from his hate speech. The attempt failed.

"She put her life on the line to get Johnson behind bars," Scott added. "She's the heroine of Deep Spring."

"That's the only thing we agree on," Mary said, placing two large plates of macadamia ribs and fries on the counter.

"Put her life on the line?" Bob probed. "In what way?"

"Well, that was so—"

"That's enough, Scott," Mary said energetically, "and you two sit over there at the table, there's no eating here at the counter."

"Calm down Mary, I'm just telling the boys a little bit about the history of our beautiful little town."

"You've already told them more than enough," Mary insisted. "You'd better pay your tab, Scott—otherwise there goes the endless supply of coffee."

Defiantly, Scott tipped the last sip from the cup down his throat as if it were whiskey. Then he mumbled something intelligible, stood up and left the diner.

Shaking her head, Mary looked at him leaving. "What possessed me back then when I married that guy?"

Seeing Pete's and Bob's astonished looks, she quickly added: "Oh, don't worry, we've been divorced for ten years. Anyway, send my greetings to Tricia. Tell her to take a good look at her intended before she says yes."

Mary wiped away the coffee stains on the counter while Bob and Pete adjourned to a sitting alcove with their food.

The macadamia-crusted ribs were excellent, but Bob and Pete had more important things on their minds.

"An unpleasant person, this Scott," Pete thought.

"—But what he said was revealing," Bob said quietly. "Actually, there is no reason for Tricia not to be proud of her investigative success… but apparently there was more going on. Mary didn't want Scott to tell us."

"We could ask Tricia," Pete suggested.

"I'm not sure she would tell us," Bob said, "and then there are these Johnson dolls. We know that the break-in intruder was walking around the rock maze the other night and

dropped one of those dolls… and that Tricia is not a fan of those things. Maybe we should check out this Johnson guy."

"But he's in prison."

"Check out his house, I mean."

"We don't have time for that, Bob. Besides, we don't know where he lived."

Bob took out his mobile phone and looked at a map of the area. "I have a hunch where."

"Excuse me?"

"Mary said he lived in Thunder. That's right next to Deep Spring. It's not really a place, just a collection of a few houses. One of them is so remote I'd say it's in the wasteland—like what Scott said. This one…" Bob showed him.

"Hmm, could be right," Pete said reluctantly.

"Then we'd best be on our way right now. After all, we don't have that much time." He winked at Pete, then waved Mary over for the bill.

8. The Secret Basement

From The Roadhouse, Bob and Pete first cycled towards Cooper Farm. However, instead of turning onto the dirt road there, they continued straight ahead.

Just past the small weathered town sign of Thunder, there was a turnoff onto a gravel road. The ride was bumpy and they had to avoid large potholes.

Soon, a simple wooden house with a garage extension came into view. The property was enclosed by a holey wire mesh fence with self-painted warning signs—'No Trespassing' and 'Private Property'—each decorated with a skull and crossbones.

The building had probably not been in the best condition when Johnson had lived here. Now it resembled a ruin. Two windows had been smashed and someone had spray-painted the house with foul language and messages in bright pink, all aimed at making sure Johnson never showed his face again.

"Pretty bleak," Pete said.

"No wonder. No one has lived here for years."

Bob got off his bike next to a huge rock. In this barren, dry wasteland there was not even a bird that could have chirped. Since no cars were passing by on the main road at the moment, it was dead silent.

"Let's have a look around," Bob decided.

They climbed through a gap in the fence and entered the property.

Pete peered inside the house through a broken window. "Not much to see. A sofa, a table, an armchair… No corn husk dolls."

Bob had gone to the adjoining shed and looked through the window there. No one was to be seen. Without much hope, he tried the door. To his surprise, it was not locked.

"It's open?" the Second Investigator wondered.

"Maybe someone has gained access," Bob suggested. "It's tempting for certain people when they know that the occupant of the house won't be coming back anytime soon."

Hesitantly, they entered the dim shed. Inside, it was furnished like a workshop. In the middle stood a huge work table made of simple wooden planks, with a clunky industrial lamp hanging above it. The only seat was an old bar stool. Various knives and scissors were carefully strung on rusty nails on the wall, as well as various strings, yarns and brushes.

However, Bob and Pete didn't have an eye for all the equipment at first because they were overwhelmed by the countless corn husk dolls lying on shelves or dangling from the ceiling on strings like herbs that had been hung up to dry. Geronimo Johnson had made the most diverse figures.

"Look! A chimney sweep," said Bob. "And there, a chef with a cap, or that group of kids over there on the shelf. There's even a dog folded out of corn leaves."

"That Johnson was a real artist," murmured the Second Investigator appreciatively. "He was really something—violent criminal or not."

"You speak of him as if he had died. He is merely in prison," Bob reminded.

Pete wanted to walk around the table. As he did so, his foot caught on a rusty iron ring embedded in the floor. "Bob! There's a trapdoor in the floor."

“Shall we have a look? Just a quick one.” Bob didn’t wait for Pete’s reply and reached for the ring.

As the trapdoor flipped open, a cloud of dust billowed up. Musty air rushed out of the square hole in the floor. Beneath it stood a rickety wooden ladder. The rest of the secret basement was lost in darkness.

Bob switched on his mobile phone light and shone down. The beam of light caught a whole armada of corn husk dolls hanging from the basement ceiling. However, they were not chimney sweeps, chefs and cute dogs dangling in the dusty air. They were emaciated figures in rags with torn mouths, skeletons with scythes in their hands and zombies with chewed-up faces.

Pete slapped his hand over his mouth. “What’s that?”

“A real chamber of horrors,” Bob murmured. “We wanted to know what it was about these dolls. The answer might be down there. I’d like to have a look around.”

Pete rolled his eyes. “Do what you have to do. I’m certainly not going down there.”

“Agreed. You keep watch.” Bob felt for the ladder rungs with his feet and carefully climbed down to the ground of trampled earth. The beam of light kept revealing new horrors. Skulls with bleeding eye sockets, desperate figures whose bodies seemed to be disintegrating, and faceless beings with missing limbs. Silently, Bob looked at the eerie figures.

“Is there anything else down there?” asked Pete impatiently.

“No, just the dolls—one scarier than the other.”

“Okay, Johnson was an artist with a real problem,” Pete commented. “If he spent years making creepy dolls like that, there’s something wrong with his head. I suggest that you come back up—”

Suddenly, the Second Investigator fell silent. Out of the corner of his eye, he had noticed a movement outside the window. Through the dirty pane he saw a bearded man approaching. He was wearing dungarees and a black holey T-shirt underneath. Both flapped around his thin body. Beneath the long fuzzy beard was a hollow-cheeked face with bright eyes. He walked straight past the rock behind which their bicycles were parked without noticing them.

As he got closer, Pete saw the tattoos on his face. Small symbols on his forehead, temples and cheek. A small inverted cross was clearly visible under his right eye.

The Second Investigator drew back in fright and sucked in his breath.

“Pete?” called Bob questioningly. “What’s going on up there?”

“Shhh! Someone’s coming. It’s Johnson!”

“Johnson? What are you talking about? He’s in—”

“He’s coming this way! Right here to the workshop! We have to run, we have to—” Pete fell silent. He realized that he could no longer get out without the man seeing him and Bob couldn’t make it up the ladder in time either. There was only one option. The Second Investigator climbed into the floor opening and let the trapdoor close over his head.

“Pete, what are you doing?”

“Shhh! Quiet now, Bob! This guy’s coming into the workshop.”

Pete had just reached the bottom of the ladder when they heard the door squeak above them. Footsteps thumped across the floorboards. They looked up. The shadow of the man could be seen between the cracks.

“Did he see you?” Bob whispered as quietly as possible.

“No.”

“Are you sure it’s Johnson?”

“He has tattoos on his face—an upside-down cross under his eye, just like that Scott guy told us earlier.”

“Then he broke out from prison? What do we do now?”

“I don’t know, Bob.”

“If we call the police, he’ll hear us right away… but I can send a message to Jupe.” Bob typed a text message for help to the First Investigator.

Johnson had sat down on the bar stool at the table and apparently started working. They heard the rustling of the corn leaves as they stared anxiously at the basement ceiling. Above their heads, nightmare dolls slowly spun around themselves like a bizarre ballet from hell.

Then Bob’s mobile phone received a message. He had turned off the sound, but the buzz of the vibration seemed unnaturally loud.

Johnson paused in what he was doing. Had he heard something? All at once he rose from his chair and hurried out of the workshop.

“He noticed us,” Pete said.

“Now what?”

“Get out!”

Pete climbed the ladder and braced himself against the trapdoor until it crashed to the floor. Quickly he climbed out. Bob followed him.

Suddenly, the workshop door flew open and slammed against the wall. Johnson stood in the doorway. His gaze was wild and he held a rifle in his hands.

Bob threw up his arms. “Don’t hurt us! We have no ill intentions, sir. We just—” He was about to say “broke in” but decided to think of an innocuous description of their act. “The door was open. We just wanted to have a look around.”

“Who are you?” cried Johnson. His voice sounded as if he was using it for the first time in a long time.

“We… we… are two stupid boys who made a mistake,” Pete said. “Please let us go.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Nothing,” Bob affirmed.

“Do you know who I am?”

“No,” Pete said quickly. Perhaps a touch too quickly.

Like a scenting animal, Johnson suddenly raised his head. A moment later, Pete and Bob heard it too. It was an approaching police siren.

Outside, a car came to a stop, doors slammed and through the window they saw Chief Holden and Tricia entrenched behind the car, pointing their guns at the workshop.

“This is the police,” Holden shouted. “We know you’re in there. Come out with your hands up!”

Johnson stared darkly at Bob and Pete. “You’ll regret this,” he growled softly before lowering his rifle, leaning it against the wall, and stepping outside.

“Geronimo Johnson. So it’s really you,” the chief called out.

“Chief Holden. What a nice surprise…” Johnson’s voice sounded rough, but his tone was unexpectedly gentle.

“Hands up, I said!” Holden barked. “That’s a good boy. Are you alone?”

“No, I’m not alone.” Johnson replied calmly. “Should I thank you for that?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The two teenage burglars. Did you send them?”

“Bob? Pete?” shouted Holden. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes! We’re in here!” Bob called out.

“Okay, Johnson, hands on the wall!”

“Chief, I don’t see why—” Johnson protested.

“Hands on the wall, I said!”

Johnson complied with the order.

With his gun raised, Holden approached Johnson, twisted his arms behind his back and handcuffed him.

Johnson let it happen without resistance. “What are you accusing me of? What have I done?”

“Hmm, where do I start?” Holden asked in mock perplexity. “With the escape from prison, perhaps?”

Johnson laughed so hard that it sent shivers down Bob’s and Pete’s spines.

“Put him in the car, Cooper, and read him his rights. Cooper! Where are you?”

Tricia had barricaded herself behind the car, her gun ready to fire at Johnson the whole time. She did not move from the spot.

When the chief noticed this, he himself pushed Geronimo Johnson rudely to the car. “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you. Do you understand the rights I have just read to you?”

Johnson did not seem to have been listening at all. His gaze was fixed on Tricia. “Officer Cooper,” he said. “I didn’t recognize you at first.”

“Sergeant,” Tricia corrected him.

“Of course. You were promoted after—”

“Shut up!” Holden ordered him. “Get in the car!”

As Johnson sat in the back seat, Chief Holden entered the workshop. “Pete, Bob, are you all right?”

“Yes.” Pete relaxed a little.

“Did he want to lock you up?”

“We went down there ourselves,” Bob explained.

“Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“So he didn’t push you down there?”

“Well,” Bob began hesitantly. “Actually, we went down to the basement voluntarily.”

“Under threat of violence, I suppose,” Holden said, but waved it off before either of them could answer. “We’ll sort all that out later. Come on.”

He returned to the car and contacted the police station by radio. “Sergeant Murray, call the county prison immediately and ask why no one has informed us of Johnson’s escape! Tell them to send someone over here right away and pick this guy up. I don’t want him in our precinct in the first place.”

“Chief,” Murray’s voice came over the loudspeaker. “I called the prison right away when the boy’s emergency call came in. The matter is… uh… a bit delicate.”

“What’s so delicate about it? Don’t push it, Sergeant!”

“Geronimo Johnson did not break out of prison. He was released… legally.”

“What are you talking about, Murray? Johnson has two years left on his sentence.”

“That has changed, sir. He was released early last week for good behaviour.”

Bob and Pete froze.

Tricia took a step back in shock.

Chief Holden’s angry clamour was drowned out by Geronimo Johnson’s peals of laughter.

9. Tricia Reveals Her Story

It was early evening. The setting sun set off a firework of colours in the sky that none of them had time for.

Only ten minutes ago, Tricia, Bob and Pete had returned and told Konrad and Jupiter what had happened. The First Investigator listened spellbound. After Bob's text message for help, Jupe had merely informed the police and hurriedly made his way to the farm with Konrad. What had happened since then, he did not know.

After Chief Holden had checked back several times with Sergeant Murray and also questioned Bob and Pete in detail about what exactly had happened, he had reluctantly had to release Johnson from his handcuffs. Johnson had nodded silently to Holden, given Tricia a long, inscrutable look, returned to his house and closed the door behind him.

Now outside on the farmhouse verandah, Konrad remarked: "I do not understand. Released for good behaviour? You did not know about this earlier?" Concerned, he looked at Tricia.

"We were informed, but the message got lost."

"A message from whom?" Jupe asked.

"The county sheriff."

The First Investigator continued: "If I understood correctly, the sheriff was actually in charge of the case at the time, right? I assume that's why the prison informed the sheriff about Johnson's release, but not the Deep Spring Police Department."

Tricia nodded.

"But someone should tell you guys!" Konrad argued.

"They did, as I have said," Tricia reminded him. "It was by e-mail. Murray found it eventually—in the spam folder." Tricia had gone pale. She stared at the tabletop. Her hands were cramped.

"What is it, Trish?" asked Konrad anxiously.

She shook her head silently. When Konrad took her hand, she clawed at his.

"Something happened back when Johnson was arrested, didn't it?" Bob tried to get her to talk. "Scott was dropping hints like that at The Roadhouse."

"What kind of hints?" asked Tricia lurkingly.

"—That you put your life on the line to convict Johnson back then. Mary stopped him from telling us more."

"What is the meaning of that?" probed Konrad. "Trish?"

"A few things happened then…" Tricia continued. "You know the story of how I found the trail that led to Johnson."

Konrad nodded. "You collected DNA samples."

"It was a drinking straw from The Roadhouse that convicted Johnson. When the positive lab analysis came in, I drove to Johnson's house alone. I really should have gone to the sheriff and let him handle it… but I wanted to play it safe and check Johnson out myself first. He had no idea I was on to him, so I figured he wouldn't feel threatened either.

"By chance, I watched through the window of his workshop as he just came out of the trapdoor. I waited until Johnson had returned to his house. Then I entered the workshop and

climbed down into the basement. There were those ghastly corn husk dolls hanging everywhere… but that was not all. I also found some of the jewellery Johnson had stolen from Mrs Williams that he had not cashed in yet.

"When I went back upstairs, Johnson was suddenly standing in the doorway. He knocked me down, took my mobile phone and locked me in the basement by pulling up the ladder and closing the trapdoor.

"I saw his delusional look. Something was wrong with him. Maybe it was the drugs or something else, but Johnson was out of his mind. He left the workshop. I couldn't even talk to him or negotiate or beg him to let me out. I was alone down there… and nobody knew about my action."

"That must have been awful," Bob said sympathetically. "How did you get out?"

"There was a loose board in the wall panelling down there. I was able to rip it out and use it to prise open the trapdoor from below."

Pete tried to imagine the situation. "But you still can't get out without a ladder… or could you climb on somewhere?"

"No. After I pushed the trapdoor open, I knotted a rope around the board, threw the board through the opening like an anchor and then pulled myself up."

"There was a rope there?"

Tricia shook her head. "I braided the rope myself—from the twines the dolls were attached to. It was a lot of work."

"It sounds like it," Bob said. "How long were you locked up down there?"

"For thirty hours."

The Three Investigators and Konrad were so shocked that at first no one could get a word out.

"Thirty hours?" cried Konrad at last. "He left you in that hole for thirty hours? What did you eat and drink?"

"Nothing," Tricia said. "When I managed to free myself, I was dehydrated and had to be taken to hospital first."

Konrad stood up, got down on his knees in front of Tricia and hugged her tightly. "I am so sorry, Trish! I am foolish to put those dolls in the barn because I thought you like them. If I knew… Why didn't you tell me this story?"

A narrow smile flitted across Tricia's face. "Because I wanted to forget them. As for the corn husk dolls, yes, those things disgust me, but you couldn't have known that."

"—And the two large dolls," Konrad continued. "I will find out who put them there."

"Let's not talk about the dolls anymore, okay?" Tricia said.

"Hokay," Konrad agreed. "—But how can they release Johnson? You could have died down there. Why is he not in prison for life?" He shook his head in bewilderment.

"Because he was diagnosed with psychosis, probably triggered by drug use. He was suffering from paranoia at the time and was no longer sane. He testified in court that he thought I was an evil secret agent. He thought he was doing the right thing."

"And they believed that?"

Tricia shrugged her shoulders. "There was a medical report. Besides, he got a fine."

"But he was released early. There is something wrong."

"Calm down, Konrad. Johnson went to therapy in jail. That's what the sheriff's e-mail said. The psychologists have concluded that he has overcome his mental illness and is sincerely sorry for his actions. That's why his sentence was shortened."

"Ha!" Konrad went on. "—And we are to believe that?"

“It is not for us to question this decision. We have not seen Johnson’s development over the last few years.”

“You don’t believe it yourself, Trish. The guy locked Bob and Pete down there in that hole—just like he did to you back then.”

“That’s not so true,” Bob interjected. “Actually—”

Konrad did not listen. “I don’t care. He is a criminal and he needs to go back to prison.”

“Please, Konrad, the day has been exhausting and… disturbing,” Tricia said. “The last thing I need right now is an argument between us.”

Konrad nodded in understanding—only to start pacing back and forth on the verandah a moment later like an animal in a too-tight cage. “*Du meine Güte!*” he muttered to himself. “This is unbelievable… really unbelievable.”

“Sit back down!” Tricia ordered. “You’re driving me crazy!”

“I need a beer now,” Konrad turned around and went into the house.

Tricia sighed.

“One thing, since Konrad isn’t around,” Bob said in a lowered voice. “Scott told me Johnson was pretty freaked out back when he was arrested… and he had sworn revenge.”

“I hate this place sometimes,” Tricia growled. “Everyone knows everything about everyone… and the older Scott gets, the less he can keep his mouth shut. I’m going to have a go at him. He can forget about parking on Main Street in the future.”

“So is it true then?” Bob asked. “The threat, I mean?”

She nodded. “Johnson raved when he was arrested. ‘I’ll get you,’ he said. ‘I’ll get you.’ He was… just glowing with rage. I’ll never forget it… but he was sick. When we met again later in court, he was quite withdrawn. He didn’t look me in the eye and didn’t reveal what was really going on inside him.”

The verandah door creaked. Konrad stood in the doorway with a beer bottle in his hand. “He did what? He threatened you?”

Tricia waved it off. “I told you—”

“I heard what you said. Johnson wants revenge?”

“Konrad, it’s not unusual for someone who is under arrest to go berserk and make threats in the heat of the moment. In most cases, it’s quite normal behaviour and harmless. I’m a police officer. I’ve seen worse.”

Konrad didn’t seem to be listening at all. “The flowers yesterday,” he said, “the stranger in the cornfield, the phone calls at night—that was him! That was Johnson.”

“Konrad, we don’t know that,” Tricia interjected. “It could also be—”

“Of course we know! Who else but him? Is there anyone else here who hates you? Johnson is up to something. He was even here—in this house.”

“Excuse me?”

“There was a break-in… a week ago.”

“What are you talking about, Konrad?”

“Remember when you asked me if I went into your yoga room? I found traces of the break-in at the window… and just over a month ago, there was a similar incident.”

Tricia turned pale. “Why don’t I know about this?”

“I didn’t want you to get upset so close to the wedding… but then I didn’t know there was a criminal coming after you.”

“There’s something else,” Pete said hesitantly. “We were on Maze Hill the day before yesterday after that flickering light incident. We wanted to see if we could find any tracks. We did, then. A footprint that matched the one Konrad found. There was also a Johnson doll lying around. That’s why we went to Johnson’s house in the first place.”

Tricia nervously groped for Trigger, who immediately came to her and let her cuddle him.

"Shall I show you the doll?" Pete asked.

"Just keep that thing away from me!"

"The break-in took place a week ago—on Wednesday," Jupiter said. "When was Johnson released?"

"The Monday before." Tricia swallowed. "You can't keep things like that a secret from me, Konrad."

"You too!" Konrad shot back. "We will talk later. Right now, I will take care of Johnson."

He slammed his beer bottle, from which he had taken only a sip, down on the table so hard that the foam bubbled out. Then he left the verandah, went to the pick-up, yanked open the door and swung himself into the driver's seat.

"Konrad!" cried Tricia.

"Where is the key?"

"I have it."

"Give it to me!"

"No! You calm down now, my dear. What are you going to do? What's the point of going to Johnson's?"

"I will beat him up!" Konrad growled. "Then I will tell him what I think."

"You are far too angry for that. We have no evidence against him. Sit back down! Please!"

Inside, the phone rang.

Tricia stood up with a groan. "I'll go get it."

Konrad was faster. He rushed up the verandah steps and pushed past Tricia into the house. Through the door, Bob saw him snatch the handset and without hesitation, blurted out: "I'll break every bone in your body, you rascal, do you hear me? … I… Oh. It's you, Olivia… Trish, your mother."

Tricia picked up the phone. "Mum? This is a bad time… What? … No, I'm kidding. What do you want? … Oh, for goodness' sake, don't be so sensitive. I'm allowed to ask what you want when you call me… Who's Aunt Georgina? Never heard of her… Sister of who? Mum, the last time I saw these people was when I was 5! What are they doing at my wedding?"

While Tricia was arguing with her mother, Konrad did not leave her side and gestured again and again for her to hand over the keys to the pick-up. She refused and finally turned her back on him.

"Mum, I have to hang up now… Why? Because everything is going down the drain here and I don't have the time to discuss Aunt Georgina with you right now, that's why!" She had become loud with the last words.

She slammed the handset down and instantly unplugged the phone line from the wall. "So… and now for you, my future husband—you're not getting the key. There's absolutely no point in going to Johnson's now. End of discussion!"

"Yes, Sergeant Cooper," Konrad said. His voice dripped with sarcasm.

"Stop it."

"Stop what?"

"Pretending I'm ordering you to do something."

"You just did, Trish. You make the rules here. You decide what I can and cannot know about you and your past. You are the boss. I have to get used to it."

“Fellas, it’s getting uncomfortable here,” Jupiter murmured.

Bob nodded. “I’d be in favour of going for a little evening walk.”

“Agreed,” Pete said immediately.

They left the verandah and moved far enough away that they no longer heard the two of them arguing. Slowly they strolled to the paddock, where Silver came towards them and let them pet her.

“This Johnson thing has really really thrown Tricia off track,” Bob said.

Pete nodded. “—And Konrad doesn’t realize he’s throwing her off even more with his freaking out. She wants him to comfort her, not break any of Johnson’s bones.”

“Pete Crenshaw, the couples therapist.” No one laughed at Jupiter’s joke. “All right, seriously, what Tricia and Konrad are fighting back there is of no further interest to us. We’ll deal with the actual case. The connection between the break-in and Johnson’s release is obvious… but I wonder why Mr Johnson would carry his corn husk dolls around with him… and then loses one of them in the maze. Hard to believe.”

“Quite easy to believe,” Bob countered, “if we assume that he didn’t lose the doll, but left it behind on purpose—as a calling card, so to speak. He wanted Tricia to find it. He wanted to scare her—like with those phone calls yesterday… and maybe even with the bunch of flowers.”

“If that’s true, it’s not a very clever approach,” Jupe said.

“Who says Geronimo Johnson is a clever person?” interjected Pete. “Scott says he’s a madman.”

“Scott says a lot though,” Bob said.

“Even so—how does the intruder that broke-in over a month ago fit into this picture?” asked Jupiter. “ At that time, Johnson was definitely still in prison.”

“Maybe Johnson had an accomplice,” Bob suggested.

“—Or it was neither Johnson nor his accomplice, who either exists or doesn’t exist,” Pete said, shaking his head in confusion. “We don’t really know anything, do we?”

“Actually we can all agree on one thing—someone is out to get Tricia… and Johnson would have a motive. I’m still not convinced he did it.”

When The Three Investigators returned to the farmhouse, it had become dark. Konrad sat alone on the verandah and stared at the table. Tricia had apparently retreated to her room.

It was a silent evening. All attempts to cheer up Konrad failed. Instead, he almost infected them with his bad mood. Finally, the three of them decided to go back into their room. They were all tired from the day’s events.

Bob and Pete went to bed early. Jupiter, however, sat at the window for a while and looked out into the night, still thinking about the events of the day. It was very quiet except for Silver occasionally snorting in the stable under the window. From the room, the First Investigator couldn’t see Maze Hill, but Mr Rice’s stately home was in view. A while later, the lights gradually went out over there, except for one window.

Then something caught Jupiter’s eyes. The curtain behind that lighted window was not hanging straight down. It looked as if it was held open a crack by an object. Jupiter dug the binoculars out of his backpack and looked through them.

It was a telescope that peered out between the two halves of the curtain. It was pointed right at Tricia’s farmhouse.

A figure moved across the room and for a moment, Mr Rice could be seen, dressed in a nightgown, looking through the telescope and seeming to adjust something. Then the light

was switched off and Jupiter could see nothing more. It was no longer possible to tell whether Rice had gone to bed or left the room.

10. “You Have the Right to Remain Silent”

When The Three Investigators met for breakfast on the verandah the next morning, Tricia was already at work and Konrad was just about to leave. The husky Bavarian seemed to have calmed down and did not show his bad mood from the night before.

“I am going to get my suit now from the tailor in Silverstone. I will be back around noon. In the meantime, can you boys set up the tables and chairs in the barn?”

“Will do,” Jupiter promised.

Konrad drove off.

“Now I can tell you what I observed last night when you were already in the realm of dreams,” the First Investigator said and reported about Mr Rice and his telescope.

“That guy is spying on Tricia?” asked Bob. “But why?”

“And why in a nightgown?” Pete chuckled.

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “We should definitely keep an eye on him, but for now, we have to get to work.”

One by one, The Three Investigators dragged the tables and chairs into the barn. It took time until everything was in place. Then they laid tablecloths and placed the crockery and cutlery. Finally, Pete folded napkins, Bob wiped the glasses clean and Jupiter polished the knives and forks.

By afternoon, the barn had indeed turned into a beautiful banquet hall. The sunlight falling through the cracks made everything shine. Satisfied, the boys looked at their work.

“These tablecloths are probably the most radiant white thing this barn has ever seen,” Pete said.

“—And the glasses would sparkle,” Bob added. “When the fairy lights come on tomorrow night, it’s going to look really cool.”

Jupiter was also satisfied. “Well done, fellas.”

“Time for a little refreshment,” Bob thought.

They went to the farmhouse. On the verandah, the hammock swayed gently back and forth. In its shade, Trigger lay and dozed.

“Tricia,” Bob said in surprise. “Where did you come from? We didn’t hear you come back.”

“Late lunch.” Tricia peered languidly out from under a cowboy hat she had pulled halfway down her face. “Murray gave me a lift. He was in a hurry to go back to the station, so he dropped me off at the main road and I walked the rest of the way in.”

“How are you going back to work later?” Bob asked.

“Konrad would be back by then,” Tricia replied. “He’ll fetch me to the police station.”

“Do you want to have a look at the barn?” Pete asked. “It’s quite a sight.”

“Don’t be angry with me, boys, but I need some rest right now. Murray is really bugging me today with his police reports. We’ve got some new software he can’t handle, but that’s his job, not mine—at least while Holden’s still in charge. When Murray is appointed chief, he can put me in charge of the paperwork. Until then…” Exasperated, she waved it off. “I’ll look at the barn later, okay?”

“Sure, get some rest,” Pete said.

The Three Investigators went into the house to make some sandwiches. The telephone rang.

"Shall I answer the phone?" Bob called out to Tricia.

"No, I'll get it." Tricia stepped off the verandah.

"Oh, Sergeant. What's up? … The formatting? Can't it wait till my lunch break is over? We can… Oh, I see. You need to see your mother…" Tricia sounded annoyed. "Then at least change your headset, I can hardly understand you."

"Poor Tricia," Pete muttered as he spread peanut butter thickly on a couple of slices of bread. "She looks like she'd rather just sleep. I'm sure she had imagined the wedding preparations to be a bit more romantic."

"Tomorrow it will be forgotten," Bob hoped.

With a stack of sandwiches, a jug of ice-cold lemonade and four glasses on a tray, they went back outside. Tricia joined them and gratefully took a sandwich. "Murray really gets on my nerves sometimes. Can't he do his own work?"

"Don't let it bother you, Tricia," Pete tried to cheer her up. "You're getting married tomorrow!"

"Yes, I am," she said soberly, "but if I had omnipotence over the universe right this second, I'd postpone the wedding for a month without anyone noticing. The last few days have been…"

She didn't finish the sentence, but Jupiter, Pete and Bob understood how exhausted Tricia was right now. Silently she finished her meal. Then she held the last piece of bread in the hollow of her hand under the table for Trigger to come and get it… but he did not come.

Tricia looked under the table. "Where is Trigger?"

"Should be under the hammock," Pete said and took a look there. "Nope, he's not here."

Tricia whistled. She went to the verandah parapet and called out: "Triiigger!"

There was no response and Tricia became nervous.

"He's probably just chasing some crows in the cornfield," Pete said. "There! Didn't I tell you? The stalks are moving over there."

Everyone went to the parapet and narrowed their eyes. In the middle of the concentrated silence, a shot rang out.

Everyone flinched. Crows flew up cawing.

"Trigger!" Tricia gasped and ran off.

"Tricia, wait!" Jupe called out.

When Tricia did not stop, the Three Investigators ran after her. When they reached the dirt road, Mr Rice stood smugly grinning in his blue overalls on the lower crossbar of his gate, from where he could look out over the cornfield. His rifle leaned against the fence.

"Mr Rice!" cried Tricia, half afraid, half angry. "Did you just shoot?"

"Indeed I have, Miss Cooper. I don't know which of your guests is wandering across my property this time, but I see my warning has had an effect. He's making a run for it. He'll be on the road in a minute." Rice laughed softly.

Pete, the tallest among them, jumped up a few times to get an overview. "That's a human, I'd say, not a dog."

Tricia breathed a sigh of relief. "If you shoot around here one more time, Mr Rice—"

"Calm down, Miss Cooper, I merely fired into the air to disperse the intruder."

"Have you seen my dog?"

"Not directly, but he runs around in there too… or another mutt. Since neither you nor your guests nor your dog care about property lines, I have to be on the lookout for who's running around in my cornfield."

“Trigger!” Tricia shouted at the top of her lungs and continued to run along the edge of the field. Only Pete managed to keep up with her.

Ahead of them on the country road, tyres screeched. It sounded as if a vehicle was hurriedly turning around and driving away. They could not see it through the wall of plants.

The two reached the road. There was no sign of a vehicle or the dog. Slowly, Bob and finally Jupiter caught up with them, panting. All of them walked down the road, looking for Trigger or his tracks.

“There!” shouted Bob, pointing to something shimmering on the floor. It was a piece of packaging.

Bob picked it up. “‘Pooch Bits’,” he read, “‘For Healthy Teeth and Silky Fur’. These are treats for dogs.”

“There are paw prints too,” Jupe said.

Tricia crouched down. “Those are Trigger’s tracks, plain as day. This is where he came out.”

“Someone lured him away with the Pooch Bits,” Jupiter concluded.

“You mean he was abducted?” asked Pete.

Tricia turned pale. Again she let out a shrill whistle. “Triiigger!”

“Fellas!” Excitedly, Bob waved his friends over. “Look!”

About a metre away in the field, a corn husk doll lay on the ground directly on Trigger’s track. Jupiter picked it up. It was a small dog doll. Obviously someone had placed it there on purpose.

“Oh, my goodness!” breathed Tricia when she saw what the First Investigator was holding.

A vehicle approached from the direction of Deep Spring. They only noticed it when it pulled up beside them on the side of the road. It was Tricia’s pick-up truck and Konrad rolled down the side window. On the passenger seat, in a transparent cover, lay his wedding suit.

“You hokay?” he asked good-humouredly. His joy faded when he saw Tricia’s face. “What happened?”

“Trigger has been abducted,” Tricia said.

“What?”

“Look at this…” Bob continued, holding up the Pooch Bits wrapper. “He was lured away from the verandah through the cornfield.”

“We heard a vehicle driving away,” Pete said, “unfortunately in the other direction, out of town. It’s unlikely that you have seen it.”

“What is in your hand?” asked Konrad. There was something lurking in his eyes.

Jupiter would have liked to hide the corn husk doll behind his back. Now he had to show it to Konrad.

“It was right on Trigger’s track,” Pete explained.

“Johnson…” Konrad said.

Tricia shrugged her shoulders, barely noticeable.

“It was Johnson…” Konrad repeated, his voice like ice.

“It could also be—”

Konrad started the engine.

“What are you up to, Konrad?”

“I will get Trigger back.”

Tricia wanted to go round the pick-up to get in on the other side, but Konrad just accelerated.

“Konrad!” she shouted as sand and pebbles splashed up beside her. “Stop! Konrad! Don’t do this!”

The white pick-up sped away.

“Has he gone mad?” Pete was upset. “What is he up to?”

“To do something stupid,” Tricia said and pulled her mobile phone out of her pocket. Luckily there was reception.

“Uh, Tricia,” Pete began, “I’m afraid Konrad won’t answer it.”

“I’m not calling him… Katie, it’s me. I need you to bring the car around right away. Yes, right now… Yes, the squad car… Yes, it’s an emergency, but I don’t tell Murray or Holden. I’ll explain everything later… and don’t forget your service weapon.”

Four minutes later, Katie was there. It was a long four minutes, during which Tricia walked up and down the road and, against her better judgement, tried three times to reach Konrad. When the police car appeared at the end of the road, she waved from a distance.

Katie braked sharply. “What’s wrong?”

“We have to get to Johnson’s,” Tricia said and got in. “Drive!”

“Just a minute,” said the First Investigator. “I think we’d better come with you.”

“I can handle this alone,” Tricia said. “Drive on, Katie.”

“You’re too excited right now, Tricia,” Jupe countered. “Maybe you let me talk to Konrad. He listens to me sometimes.”

Tricia hesitated only briefly. “All right then. Get in, but you do what I say, understand?”

Jupiter nodded and The Three Investigators quickly squeezed into the back seat.

Katie drove off and Tricia described the situation to her in short sentences. It was only a few minutes by car down the road to the turnoff that led to Johnson’s remote property. Katie bumped along the track at full throttle until they reached Johnson’s house.

The white pick-up truck had simply knocked over the wire mesh fence with warning signs. The driver’s door was open. So was the door to Johnson’s house. Screaming could be heard from inside.

The five jumped out of the car.

“You stay here!” Tricia ordered. Her gaze brooked no argument.

The Three Investigators waited by the car while Tricia and Katie climbed over the collapsed fence and ran towards the house.

The shouting got louder. Blows could be heard.

“Where… is… the… dog?” roared Konrad.

“Konrad!” shouted Tricia. Quick as a flash, she took the gun from the surprised Katie and ran into the house with it. Katie followed her breathlessly.

The Three Investigators remained outside but continued to hear the commotion inside the house. There was a crash and a thud. Johnson screamed.

“Stop it!” shouted Tricia.

But the muffled blows did not stop. Johnson groaned in pain.

“Stop it now, I said!”

Johnson gasped and groaned.

Then suddenly Konrad shouted: “Trish! Are you mad?”

“Hands up!” Tricia yelled.

“This guy took your dog. Are you crazy now?”

“Hands up, Konrad! … Katie, cuff him.”

“Trish! Stop it! You handcuff him, not me!”

“Get out!” Johnson pressed out. “Get out, I said!”

“Goodness,” Pete muttered.

“Johnson is telling the truth,” Bob said. “He couldn’t have abducted Trigger. There’s no other car anywhere around here.”

Konrad stumbled out of the door. His hands were tied behind his back, his shirt torn. He was bleeding from the lip and still burning with rage.

“Take this thing off, Katie!” The next moment, his eyes fell on The Three Investigators. A jolt went through him, as if his situation only really became clear to him at that second.

Jupiter walked up to him. “What have you done, Konrad?”

“That criminal took Trigger!”Konrad defended himself. Helplessness was written all over his face… as well as shame.

“You beat him up,” Jupiter stated. “Konrad, that was… You had no proof, and even if you did, you should call the police instead of—”

“The police?” Konrad interrupted him. “My future wife is the police. Don’t you see what this guy is doing to her? The phone calls, the flowers and now he has Trigger! This is terrible! You think he would give the dog back if Tricia came in uniform? Or that nice Katie? He needs a lesson.”

“And he’s not the only one.” Tricia stood in the doorway and looked pityingly at Konrad. “Konrad Schmid, you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law…”

11. Behind Bars

When the door of the holding cell slammed shut and the key was turned, there was something final about it.

"I cannot believe you are doing this," Konrad said.

"In the first place, I can't believe what you did," Tricia said coldly.

The Three Investigators stood silently in the background and could hardly look. However, they could not look away either.

Chief Holden and Sergeant Murray's jaws had dropped when the entourage had entered the police station and Katie had taken the arrested Konrad straight to the holding cell. Katie had then told her colleagues what had happened. Holden's face had turned red and a thick vein had pulsated in his neck, but a warning look from Katie made him swallow his outburst of anger. Now Holden, Murray and Katie were at the front of the office while Tricia looked at Konrad through the bars.

"Trish, I am the good guy, you know that. Let me out. Please!"

"I can't do that, Konrad. I'm a police officer. Whether you're a stranger or my fiancé, I witnessed an act of violence and did what I'm supposed to do as a police officer, and that was to arrest you."

"That guy wants to get you?"

"Konrad, that's not the point at all. You were the first to strike! This outburst of violence… almost leaves me speechless."

"I want to protect you," Konrad said meekly.

"That's no way to protect anyone, but it's very insightful that you see it differently. Thank you for opening my eyes."

"Trish, what are you talking about? Tomorrow is our wedding!"

Tricia laughed bitterly. "The wedding is off!"

"What?" Konrad was shocked and in the next moment, Tricia turned on her heel and walked out.

"Trish! Come back!" Konrad called out. When Tricia did not respond, he turned to the boys and pleaded: "Boys, go after her, please."

The Three Investigators nodded and followed Tricia into the office of the police station where the other three police officers were waiting. Tricia didn't bother with long speeches. "Keep him in the cell until tomorrow, Chief… and keep an eye out for my dog, please."

Holden nodded. "Murray, I want you to go over to Johnson's place and check him out."

"No," Tricia objected. "Johnson is shocked and angry. If you go to him now, you'll only make the situation worse and he'll definitely report Konrad… if he is not already thinking of doing that."

"Ha! He's out on parole," Holden said. "Nobody believes him. He'll be back behind bars in no time."

"Chief," Tricia said forcefully. "It was Konrad who snapped, not Mr Johnson."

"Did he really abduct your dog?" interjected Sergeant Murray.

"As soon as I know that for sure, I will arrest him personally, but I don't know anything yet. Leave Mr Johnson alone—at least for today. His fear for his own freedom is the only

thing that could keep Konrad out of jail right now. Do you understand that?"

Holden nodded thoughtfully. "Damn, you're right again, Sergeant."

Tricia tapped her invisible service cap. "I'm going to call it a day." She would have been on duty for another hour, but Holden only nodded at her in understanding.

As The Three Investigators were about to follow her, she said: "Go ahead and stay with Konrad. He needs you more than I do right now."

Jupiter, Pete and Bob returned to Konrad.

"What did she say?" Konrad asked.

"Nothing more," said Bob. "You'll stay here until tomorrow in any case."

"But she cannot be serious!"

"What do you want her to do, Konrad?" asked Pete. "She would get into huge trouble if she pretended nothing was wrong."

"But what was I supposed to do?"

"Not freaking out would have been a start," Jupiter said.

"Hokay, that was… stupid of me… but since I know what happened to Tricia back then with Johnson… I have such anger inside me."

"We understand that," Bob assured him, "but you can't just go around beating up people."

"That guy is a criminal!" Konrad revolted. "I have to get out of here. I have to talk to Tricia again. She cannot call off the wedding because of all this. Then Johnson would have won! Jupe, get the chief. I want to talk to him."

"Forget it," Jupiter said. "Holden will never let you out."

"—But I have to get out of here."

"You need to calm down first and foremost," Jupe advised.

"How am I to do that?" Konrad asked in despair. "We are getting married tomorrow. She cannot be serious!"

… And so the conversation started all over again. The Three Investigators talked at Konrad, Konrad talked at The Three Investigators, but they still couldn't come to a solution. They talked until after sunset, but at some point all the arguments had been exchanged twenty times and Jupiter was slowly losing patience.

"We're leaving now," he said abruptly. "We can't help you anymore today, Konrad."

"Yes, you can. Talk to Tricia—right now. Ask her to forgive me. Maybe she will change her mind. Promise me that, hokay?"

"We will," Bob assured him.

"Promise?"

"We promise," Pete also said.

"Phew," Pete sighed as the three of them stepped out of the police station. It had gone dark. "What a drama."

"Konrad messed up big time," Bob said. "I feel sorry for him."

Jupiter raised his hands defensively. "May I ask to interrupt the discussion for five minutes? My ears are ringing. In any case, we have to talk to Tricia in a minute. I'm already tired of all the fuss."

Tricia's white pick-up, of which Pete had driven here from Johnson's house, was still in front of the police station. It seemed that Tricia had left the vehicle there for the boys and she had instead walked home. When Bob opened the passenger door, the wedding suit slipped off the seat and fell onto the ground.

The three of them got into the pick-up and Pete drove back to the Cooper farmhouse.

To their surprise, Tricia was not at home. There was a note on the telephone bench that read: 'Out looking for Trigger'. Next to it the old-fashioned answering machine was flashing. The display showed thirteen calls.

"That many?" wondered Pete, his finger hovering over the play button.

"We can't do that," Bob said. "This is Tricia's answering machine."

"Right."

Then the phone rang again. They let it ring, but stayed by it until the answering machine started.

"Tricia, it's your Aunt Ruth. Your mother called earlier. She said the wedding's off. It can only be a misunderstanding, right? Why don't you give your Uncle Carl and me a call?"

"She really did it," Pete said. "She called off the wedding."

The phone rang again. "Trish, dear, it's me again, Mum. Aunt Ruth wasn't thrilled at all. She didn't quite believe me either. You need to talk to her, and I have a right to know what happened in the first place. You're losing yourself in silly insinuations. Don't think you can hide from me forever. You'll have to talk to your mother sometime. Call me, do you hear?"

Now the display showed fifteen messages.

"It's probably going to be like this till tomorrow," Pete speculated. "If I were Tricia, I wouldn't answer the phone either."

"What are we going to do now?" asked Bob. "We wanted to talk to Tricia, but she's not here."

"She'll be back," Jupe said.

"I don't know," Pete murmured. "She might be looking for Trigger all night, and we promised Konrad."

The First Investigator sighed. "What are you going to do now?"

"Go to The Roadhouse?" Pete suggested. "Maybe she's there or someone knows where she is. We could also get something to eat."

As if on cue, Jupiter's stomach began to growl. "Agreed, but you two go. I'll stay here in case she comes back."

Pete nodded and together with Bob he set off again in the pick-up.

They hadn't been gone long when the phone rang for the third time. "This is Mathilda Jones from Rocky Beach. I got your message, Miss Cooper. The wedding really isn't going ahead? I'd like to speak to my nephew but he never answers his phone. Could you please ask him to listen to this message," Aunt Mathilda's tone became more imperious. "Jupe, if you're listening to this, if this has anything to do with you three boys again, you know, your club of mysterious secrets or whatever, then… then you better fix it!" She hung up.

Jupiter had wanted to pick up the phone but Aunt Mathilda would only overwhelm him with questions to which he himself had no answer at the moment. It would all have to wait until tomorrow.

Exhausted, but at the same time plagued by an inner restlessness, he opened the fridge three times and closed it again. Bob and Pete would be back soon with something to eat. He walked aimlessly around the house. It seemed unusually quiet. He heard the woodwork crack —something he had not noticed before. Bob and Pete, Tricia and Konrad, Trigger—nobody was around. Even Silver didn't make a sound.

Jupiter stumbled. Silver really did not make a sound. Her snorts and whinnies were usually heard regularly. Confused, Jupiter left the house.

The stable door was open. Silver was not there and was not standing in the paddock.

An uneasy feeling crept over the First Investigator. First Trigger—now Silver? Had Tricia's horse also been abducted? Or had Tricia ridden out with her horse? The saddle was missing. Did it make sense for Tricia to go looking for the missing Trigger on horseback? Only if she thought he was in the wilderness. Out there, a horse was certainly an advantage.

The uneasy feeling did not leave Jupiter. On the contrary, it grew stronger. Tricia alone out there in the wasteland… What was she up to?

He returned to the house. Attentively, he went through every room. With a guilty conscience, he also entered Tricia's bedroom. The bed was not made. He pulled open the bedside drawer on Tricia's side. There were earplugs, handkerchiefs, a sleep mask, a watch and a room key. Jupiter took the key, went upstairs and tried it on the door to the yoga room.

It fitted.

12. Through the Desert

The room was almost empty. There was a pile of blankets and cushions with oriental patterns, a sports mat rolled out in the middle of the room, a few yoga equipment, a small music system and a carved wooden box.

Jupiter knelt on the floor and opened the box. Inside were incense sticks, a lighter, a brown screw-top bottle and another key. The label on the bottle said: *Deconvulsan*. Jupiter mentally rummaged through his knowledge of Latin and frowned. He put the bottle back in the box, took the key and left the yoga room. He had an idea which lock this key fitted.

Tricia's gun cabinet, where she kept her service weapon, was in the basement. Jupiter had seen it when he was down there looking for extension cables for the barn. It looked like a very sturdy cabinet.

The key fitted. Inside were a few papers, a cap, gloves and a holster—but no gun.

The uneasy feeling intensified once more. Suddenly Jupiter was almost sure he knew where Tricia had gone to. She had been right in everything she had said to Konrad at the police station—that Johnson should not be convicted or even punished as long as there was no evidence against him, but that did not mean that Tricia herself believed in Johnson's innocence.

Jupiter went upstairs, put the second key back in the box in the yoga room. Then he quickly put on warmer clothes, wrote a note, grabbed his backpack and left the house. He was sure where Tricia had gone to—Johnson's house. Luckily, he knew where the house was as he had earlier seen the map on Bob's phone.

He swung onto his bicycle and cycled along the bumpy dirt road. The old dynamo whirred and gave a weak, yellowish cone of light, while the rusty chain squeaked.

On reaching junction to the main road, Jupiter decided to call Bob and Pete. When he took his mobile phone out of his pocket, he discovered that the battery was flat. He had hardly used the phone the last few days due to lack of reception and had therefore completely forgotten to charge it. That was why Aunt Mathilda hadn't manage to reach him. He cursed his inattention and pedalled all the harder.

The night was pitch dark and the path seemed endless to him. By the time he got near to Johnson's house, he was sweating wet. He decided to switch off the dynamo so that the lamp would not betray him.

Two minutes later, a small yellow light appeared in front of him. It was an illuminated window. Jupiter cycled a little closer but eventually he stopped as he didn't dare get any closer with the squeaky bicycle chain. He put the bike down and took bis binoculars out of his backpack. Then he crept along on foot, focussing on the window but saw no one behind it.

A horse snorted. Jupiter froze. It was Silver. She couldn't be far away. The First Investigator licked his index finger and held it in the air. The wind was coming from the south. That was why Silver hadn't scented him. Only when the horse moved her head did Jupiter make out her outline a few metres away.

Next to the horse stood Tricia. Her bright mop of hair shimmered in the darkness. She fiddled with a rifle, put the barrel over Silver's back and looked through the scope.

Without even bothering to be quiet, Jupiter walked towards Tricia. “What are you doing?” he hissed.

Silver shied away and neighed softly, while Tricia flinched and jerked the rifle around before she realized who had hissed at her.

“Jupiter!” she whispered. “What are you doing here?”

“That’s what I’m asking you.”

“Are you crazy, scaring me like that?”

“I had to draw attention to myself somehow… and I didn’t want to wait until you had your finger on the trigger. What are you doing here, Tricia?” He pointed accusingly at the rifle.

“Calm down, Jupiter, I wasn’t going to shoot anyone. This rifle has a night-vision scope.”

“You own something like that?”

“It’s part of the precinct’s arsenal.”

“—Where you stole it today before you went home.”

“I didn’t steal it. I am a police officer. I am allowed to take this rifle.”

“To do what with it?”

“Watch Johnson, of course. Please refrain from using that accusatory tone, Jupiter. I’m not some crazed cop out for revenge, you understand? I just want my dog back.”

“So you do think Johnson abducted him?”

Tricia hesitated with her answer. “Not necessarily. He’s just the only one who comes to mind.”

“This afternoon you said something else. You were practically defending him.”

“I wasn’t defending him. I was saving Konrad from getting himself into even more trouble.”

“But Johnson as a dog abductor makes little sense, Tricia. I don’t want to rule it out either, but—”

“Tell me who else would have done it? Who would do such a thing? … Well? Johnson is the only suspect.”

“So what’s your plan now?”

“I’m shadowing him.”

“Over the scope of a rifle? And with a gun in a holster?” Jupiter pointed to the bulge under Tricia’s jacket at her hip.

“When he locked me up then, I was unarmed. I rarely make mistakes twice. Now I’ve had enough of your interrogation. How about you tell me what you’re doing here in the first place?”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “I thought your disappearance was suspicious, so I went looking for you. Besides, I’m making good on a promise I made to Konrad—to talk to you.”

“What does he want?”

“Your forgiveness.”

“I see. Go back home.”

“Certainly not, Tricia, I—”

Silver’s ears perked forward and she neighed softly. Tricia put her finger to her lips and looked through the scope.

Over at the house, the front door had opened. Johnson stepped out. He wore a large straw hat on his head and carried a backpack. Over his shoulder, like a water carrier, he balanced a long wooden stick with dozens of corn husk dolls dangling from it. He turned off the light and left his property in the opposite direction. Soon he was no longer visible in the darkness.

“Interesting,” Tricia murmured. “Where on earth is he going with his dolls?” She lowered the rifle. “Come along. I want to see if I can find a trace of Trigger.” Tricia took Silver’s reins.

Jupiter followed her. At the wire mesh fence, she pressed the rifle into his hand. “Look through here. This is where you adjust the focus. Can you see Johnson?”

“Yes. He is walking away from us.”

“Keep an eye on him.”

Tricia left Jupiter and disappeared into Johnson’s house. She was only inside for a minute. Then she entered the workshop and looked in the basement.

“Nothing,” she said after she returned. “No ‘Pooch Bits’ either. There’s just some simple furniture in the house and a mattress on the floor. Among them was Johnson’s rifle, which he didn’t take with him.”

“So what now?”

Tricia peered into the darkness. “I’m following him.”

“I’ll go with you.”

Tricia shook her head vigorously.

“You won’t be able to stop me,” Jupe said.

She started to answer, but then fell silent and held out her hand demandingly. Jupiter handed her back the rifle. She put her foot in the stirrup, swung herself onto Silver’s back and rode off.

Jupiter hurried back to his bike and rode after Tricia. Together they took up Johnson’s pursuit through the desert.

They went at a walking pace. Jupiter cycled as slowly as he could and Tricia kept a regular look through the scope to make sure that they stayed a distance behind Johnson, who was on foot.

They were going towards the Hualapai Mountains. Jupiter knew that there was a small canyon there, on the other side of which lay Deep Spring’s neighbouring town of Silverstone. Johnson was heading towards it.

After a good half hour, he had reached the beginning of the canyon and disappeared behind the first boulders.

“Watch out now,” Tricia muttered. “I’ve lost sight of him.”

They approached the mouth of the canyon, where steep rock walls rose up to the left and right. Tricia dismounted and fastened Silver’s reins to a rock, placing a stone on top. “Her hooves are too loud in there.”

Jupiter also left his bicycle there. They entered the canyon on foot.

The faint starlight that had lit their way up to here was swallowed by the boulders. It was as if Tricia and Jupiter were entering a dark tunnel. On reflection, it was a perfect trap. By the time Jupiter’s uneasy feeling sounded an alarm, it was already too late.

“Freeze,” a gruff voice sounded above them.

13. Johnson's Story

Jupiter winced and raised his eyes. Johnson had climbed a little way up the right boulder. His silhouette stood out darkly against the night sky, which was only a few shades brighter.

Tricia immediately took cover behind another boulder.

"Sergeant Cooper," Johnson said in a voice that echoed eerily. "Are you serious? You're ambushing me and following me across the desert? What kind of sick game is this? What do you want from me?"

"I want my dog back," Tricia replied frankly.

"I've never seen your dog before. Leave me alone."

"My dog was abducted and one of your dolls was at the scene—just like the incident at the rock maze the other night."

"What are you talking about? Do you seriously think I would abduct your dog and leave such an obvious trail?"

"It's possible—just to scare me."

"You're really serious," Johnson said, stunned. "You think I'm out to get you. What makes you think of that?"

"Are you kidding me, Johnson? You went crazy back then and swore revenge."

"That was six years ago!" cried Johnson indignantly. "Back then I… I did all kinds of bad things, including seriously injuring a defenceless senior citizen. I was a drug-addict wreck… but I'm clean now. I've been in therapy, and I did my time. Do you understand what I'm saying, Sergeant?

"I was convicted and punished and now I'm free again—on parole, as you now know. One misstep and I'd be back in prison. Do you honestly think I would risk my freedom for some silly vendetta? But that's the point, isn't it? For me to lose my temper so I can be locked up again right now. I won't do you that favour, Sergeant Cooper."

Tricia shook her head unwillingly. "What are you talking about? You are not the victim here. You're acting as if I want to take revenge on you."

"Isn't that what you want?" asked Johnson challengingly. "What else is it about your teenage friends breaking into my basement? And then the police just happen to show up? You were going to accuse me of locking those two boys in there, as what happened to you back then. 'Look, Geronimo Johnson is still the monster he was…' and then that mugging yesterday by that crazy huge guy. Why do you think he only got a few scrapes and I got this?" Accusingly, he pointed to his right eye. "I hardly defended myself because I was afraid he would report me for assault—which means my parole would be over."

"You believe there is a plot against you," Jupiter said, slowly realizing what was going on inside Mr Johnson. "You think the Deep Spring police were just waiting for you to come back so they could take you down. Well, I can assure you that's not the case."

Undeterred, Johnson turned to the First Investigator. "By the way, who are you?"

"Another teenage friend of Sergeant Cooper's. Don't you want to come down from up there? Then we can talk normally."

After a moment's hesitation, Johnson actually climbed down from the boulder. Up close, they saw that his right eye was rimmed with an ugly and almost black bruise.

“No one in Deep Spring knew that you were released on parole,” Jupiter explained. “The information had gone under, and that my friends were in your workshop basement… well, they didn’t know about your release either.”

Johnson laughed bitterly. “And that justifies their break-in?”

“No,” Jupiter admitted, “but they had a good reason to check on your property. In the last few days, corn husk dolls have turned up in connection with some mysterious incidents. The suspicion was that they came from your house.”

“Ha! I have made and sold so many dolls in my life that they could really belong to anyone… or they were stolen from my house. After all, I haven’t been there for years. When I came back last week, it was half-ruined and looted. I even saw someone scrambling out from my workshop when…” Johnson fell silent. “Wait a minute!”

“Someone was in your workshop on the day you were released?” Jupiter enquired.

“Yes, and it was not for the first time, from the looks of it… No wonder. I knew Deep Spring wouldn’t forget my attack on Mrs Williams… nor what I did to you, Sergeant Cooper. I knew no one would welcome me with open arms, and had expected rejection, nor was I surprised by my devastated house.

“To escape worse, I returned secretly and quietly. I didn’t want to meet anyone. Why do you think I walk through the desert in the middle of the night? I’m doing a three-hour walk to Silverstone. I do it at night because it’s too hot during the day. I walk so as not to meet anyone who might recognize me had I took the bus. I no longer have a car.

“I have nothing at all, only my creativity. Making corn husk dolls is like therapy for me. I give shape to my anger and my fears and then lock them up in the basement.

“At the same time, it’s the only thing I know how to do. It’s the only way for me to make money. There’s a trader who lives in Silverstone who regularly sells handicrafts at the farmers markets in the area. He wants to take the dolls I made in prison off my hands. With the money, I buy myself something to eat for the week in Silverstone so I don’t have to shop in Deep Spring, where someone might spit in my face as soon as they meet me on the street.

“For the next few weeks, I’ll do the exact same thing with the new dolls I should make by then. Hopefully I can save up enough money that way to start over somewhere else.”

Johnson looked Tricia firmly in the eye. “This is my reality, Sergeant Cooper. Thoughts of revenge don’t enter into it.”

“That… makes sense,” Tricia admitted hesitantly. Very slowly, she lowered her shoulders.

“We suspected for a while that you were behind the incidents and had left the corn husk dolls behind on purpose, as a calling card, so to speak,” Jupiter explained. “The thought was not wrong, but it wasn’t you who left the dolls at the scene, Mr Johnson, but someone who wanted to cast suspicion on you—possibly the thief you surprised in your workshop on the day you returned. He may have stolen the dolls for that purpose. What exactly did you see?”

Johnson shrugged his shoulders. “Not much—just that someone ran away.”

“Was it a man or a woman?”

“A man, but before you ask me for his description—it was dark and I only saw him from a distance—medium height, medium build.”

“Middle aged?”

Johnson shrugged his shoulders.

“If my new theory is correct, then this man wanted to frame you for the abduction of Tricia’s dog. It was made to look like an act of revenge. In reality, it’s a red herring. The corn husk dolls were a false lead that reliably misled us.”

“But who could be behind it?” asked Tricia.

Jupiter pinched his lower lip thoughtfully. “Maybe that’s the wrong question. Not who—but why? Why does someone call you in the middle of the night? Why is your dog being abducted? What’s the motive?”

Tricia looked at him questioningly. “If it’s not about revenge—what is it about, Jupiter?”

Pete and Bob drove straight to The Roadhouse in the pick-up to get something for dinner. They also hoped to see Tricia there. However, the diner was empty. No one was sitting at the tables.

When the two boys entered, Mary was mopping the floor. Behind the hatch, Nigel was busy cleaning the kitchen. The jukebox was playing Dolly Parton again.

“The kitchen is already closed, boys,” Mary called out when she saw the two of them, “but if you just want a drink…”

“Oh, too bad,” said Pete. “We thought you would be open late on Friday nights and we’d get another little something here.”

Mary shrugged her shoulders. “Sorry. Not worth it. People are more likely to be over at Hardy’s at this time.”

“We’re also looking for Tricia,” Bob said. “Was she here by any chance? Or could she be at Hardy’s?”

Mary shook her head. “She wasn’t here.” She put the mop aside and leaned at the counter. Her eyes flashed. “Is it really true what everyone is saying that the wedding has been called off?”

“Yes, the wedding is off,” Bob confirmed uneasily.

“Why?”

Bob and Pete looked at each other and were silent.

“I’ve heard the most amazing rumour,” Mary continued. “Someone was saying that Tricia arrested and imprisoned her husband, uh… I mean, her husband-to-be. It’s amazing what people make up, isn’t it?”

The Second Investigator shook his head and laughed a little too loudly. “Yes, really incredible.”

“We’ll be going now,” Bob said quickly. He was about to pull Pete outside when Nigel stuck his head through the hatch.

“Wh-what am I going to do with the f-food now? T-Tricia has c-cancelled everything… b-but I’ve already bought all the food.”

“And all the things he’s bought, poor Nigel,” Mary said sympathetically. “Ingredients and spices I’ve never heard of. For weeks, he’s been throwing himself into this wedding as if it were his own. He’s even taken care of the flower arrangements. A few days ago, he even bought some white roses… What a dream!”

Nigel blushed a little. “Th-they w-weren’t for the w-wedding.”

“Oh, no?” Mary beamed. “Nigel! Do you have a girlfriend?”

Nigel lowered his head and started wiping frantically across his work surfaces.

“We don’t know anything about the food,” Bob said sympathetically, “but we’ll ask Tricia, okay? We’re really sorry. See you then.”

They left The Roadhouse. Pete turned excitedly to Bob. “Did you hear that? White roses! Those rainbow roses that were in the cornfield…”

Bob nodded. “They’ve been dyed. Originally they were white.”

“Do you think that’s a coincidence?”

“How did Jupe put it so nicely? In such a small place, unusual things are more likely to be connected than not… but why would Nigel hang around in the cornfield outside Tricia’s house on her birthday? He could have just handed her the flowers, couldn’t he?”

“I don’t know,” Pete replied. “I’m not Jupe… but Nigel is a funny guy. He’s always eavesdropping from his kitchen, have you noticed? Maybe we should check him out. We could put a tail on him when he’s about to get off work.”

“He’s still cleaning the kitchen. Maybe there’s enough time to have a quick look around his house.”

“Do you know where he lives?” Pete asked.

“No, but we can find out.”

They walked across the intersection. On the other side was Hardy’s. Rock music and a buzz of voices came from the open door.

Bob and Pete entered the well-filled place and noticed with a glance around that Tricia was not here. Instead, they met Scott, who obviously had his permanent place at the bar here as well.

“Our curious visitors from California,” he called out, tapping a free barstool. “Sit down, boys, and tell me if what the whole joint is talking about is really true. The wedding is cancelled because Schmid is a felon wanted for years and the FBI arrested him?”

“We only heard that the wedding is off,” Bob replied without commenting on the other rumours. “Tell me, Scott, you must know where Nigel lives. We’d like to… bring him something.”

“Of course I know that—on Desert Drive. It’s the last house before the dead end, but maybe you’ll get lucky and he’s still at The Roadhouse.”

“Oh yes, that could be,” Bob said innocently. “We’ll go there and have a look in a minute.”

They turned around and headed for the exit. Scott shouted something to them, but they pretended not to hear him.

“That was easy,” Pete thought when they had left the pub.

Desert Drive was a lonely road on the edge of Deep Spring. There were only a few fenced-in properties here. The last house before the dead end was quickly found. They parked the pick-up a little way away in the shade of a dilapidated corrugated iron shed.

Nigel lived in a tiny white wooden house with the paint peeling off. The small garage was apparently not being used for a car as it was full of junk. The two investigators circled the house. Behind the windows, everything was dark.

“Nothing suspicious so far,” Bob said.

“You don’t want to get into this now, do you?” asked Pete anxiously. “I mean, one delivery of white roses doesn’t make Nigel a dog abductor.”

“No, but let’s at least shine a light through the windows.” Bob fumbled for his mobile phone. “Bummer. I left my phone charging back at the farmhouse. Did you bring yours?”

Pete nodded, switched on the light and held it against one of the rear windows. The cone of light illuminated a messy living room. Clothes lay carelessly thrown on the sofa and the armchair. Dishes were piled up on a small coffee table. The work table was covered with paint bottles and jars containing pens and brushes. Above them on the wall hung photos.

Pete looked closely. “Uh-oh, Bob! Do you see what I see?”

“The photos…” Bob replied. “They’re all photos of Tricia!”

14. The Wedding Gift

Pete and Bob looked at each other with wide eyes. “They’re hanging there like posters, Bob! Nigel seems to be… a huge fan of Tricia.”

Bob swallowed. “If it is, Tricia doesn’t know about it though. That kind of thing is usually not a good sign, Pete.”

Pete noticed that the window they were looking through was not fully closed. The latch wasn’t gripping properly. “I can push it open.”

“Are you sure you want to go in?” Bob asked.

“—But we should take a closer look, shouldn’t we? Those photos there… they look like Nigel…”

“—Secretly admires Tricia?” Bob wondered.

“At least… or even obsessed with her. You know, like in those crime novels where someone worships a woman from afar but she doesn’t know anything about it, and then that someone slowly goes crazy and does crazy things.”

“You watch too many movies… but I agree with you that we should have a look… since the window is almost open anyway…”

Pete nodded, reached his fingers into the narrow gap and pushed it up. Since the room was almost at ground level, it was a piece of cake to climb in.

The photos on the wall were partly from newspaper articles reporting on the Johnson arrest and the courageous action of a young police officer from Deep Spring, but there were also private shots. Tricia was always well photographed, beaming at the camera.

On the table were various portrait drawings of Tricia, which had been copied from the photos. They were pencil sketches as well as colour studies. Many of the drawings bore the name ‘Tricia Cooper’ in sweeping, ornate script.

The main work placed in the middle of the table was an almost finished airbrushed portrait. It had turned out pretty well. Next to it was a printed out instruction booklet on how to make rainbow roses. Pete felt a chill run down his spine.

“I was right, Bob,” he whispered. “Nigel is obsessed with Tricia. What does that mean? Has he abducted Tricia because… because she doesn’t want to marry him but Konrad? Does he want to make her miserable? Is he insane?”

Suddenly the door to the living room was pushed open. Nigel stood in the frame and stared at them in horror. In one hand, raised as if to throw, he held a can of what could be pet food. In the other hand was a knife. “Don’t m-m-move!”

Pete was closest to Nigel. Bob was near the open window.

“Get out, Bob!” the Second Investigator shouted without thinking. “Get the police!”

In a flash, Bob whirled around, scrambled out of the window and was gone.

Nigel focused on Pete. “P-p-police? Wh-what kind of g-guys are you anyway?”

“Don’t get upset, Nigel,” Pete implored the young man. “It’s not good for your condition.”

“C-condition? What are you talking about?”

Pete did not know himself. He had the feeling that he had to stop a mentally ill person from doing something rash. The knife in Nigel’s hand trembled.

“Listen,” Pete said in a calm manner. “I won’t tell anyone what I saw in here if you just give me the dog now. Okay?”

Nigel shook his head in confusion. “What kind of dog? And what did you s-s-see?”

“I’m talking about Trigger.” Pete pointed to the can in Nigel’s hand.

“Tricia’s d-dog? Are you c-crazy? This is… uh… Susan’s food.”

“Susan?”

“My cat. Wh-what are you thinking of? She’s outside right now.”

“Oh,” said Pete. “I thought it was dog food.”

“Wh-what are you even talking about?”

“Tricia’s dog has been abducted.”

“Trigger was abducted? And you th-think I did it? Wh-wh-why would I do that?”

“Well, because… The photos. It looks like… you really like Tricia.”

Nigel blushed. Pete could see that even in the dim light coming through the window from the street.

“Of course I like her,” Nigel softly admitted.

“Such… affection,” Pete said carefully, “can quickly get a little… out of control.”

Nigel’s eyes widened. “You th-think this is m-m-my Tricia altar or something? And I’m a freakin’ s-s-stalker?”

Pete shrugged his shoulders in embarrassment. That was exactly what he thought, because he could make no other sense of what he saw.

“I made the drawings because of the c-cake.”

“The… c-cake?” Now it was Pete’s turn to stutter.

“Chief Holden’s w-wedding present.” Nigel put the knife down. “C-come along.” He left the room.

Pete was confused. He looked out of the window for a moment, but Bob had long since disappeared.

Hesitantly, he followed Nigel, who had gone into the kitchen and opened a large refrigerator. In the middle compartment, which was just big enough for it, was a square marzipan cake. On its shimmering surface, Tricia’s smiling face gazed back at him—a reproduction of the portrait on the work table, painted with food colouring and an airbrush gun. Below it, in curved letters, was written: ‘Congratulations, Lieutenant Cooper!’ The banner was framed by two police badges.

“You made this?” marvelled Pete.

Nigel nodded. “A little h-h-hobby of mine. The drawings next door are s-s-studies. The Chief commissioned this c-cake from me. It’s his w-wedding present.”

“But why ‘Lieutenant Cooper’? Tricia is a sergeant.”

“That’s the gift. She’s going to be p-promoted… but the w-wedding is off. I don’t know… what’s going to happen to the p-promotion… or the c-cake. Nobody tells me anything.”

Slowly Pete relaxed. “Look, Nigel, I’m sorry. Very sorry. This is all a big misunderstanding… about the white roses.”

Nigel nodded. “I already understood that you had s-s-suspicions earlier. That’s why I c-came home so quickly.”

“So the rainbow roses really came from you? But why did you hide in the cornfield and not just hand her the flowers?”

“I wanted to. I thought I’d meet her at h-h-home on her b-birthday… b-but then from the dirt road, I s-saw you guys and the chief and the others… and K-Konrad… and I realized th-that I wasn’t invited.”

Pete frowned. “You could have given her the flowers anyway. I’m sure Tricia would have been pleased.”

Again Nigel blushed slightly. He lowered his gaze.

“You really like Tricia, don’t you?” Pete surmised.

Nigel nodded, barely perceptible. “I suddenly felt like a f-fool with my f-flowers and I… uh… hesitated. When I saw Mr Rice coming out, I hid in the c-cornfield… and… and I dropped the f-flowers.”

“So you dropped the flowers… but now that you have explained, it was all quite harmless.” Pete sighed. “Everything was harmless.”

Suddenly, a thought flashed through him. “Bob! Goodness, he’s going to the police now. I’ll make a quick call to the station.”

He had Chief Holden on the line in a moment. “Good evening, Chief, this is Pete. Has Bob shown up at the station yet? … No? Good. He’ll be there very excitedly in a minute. Whatever he says, it’s a false alarm. I’ll explain later. I’ll come to you now. Tell him to wait for me.”

Pete ended the call and turned back to Nigel. “Sorry again about our break-in. Your window doesn’t close properly.”

“I-I know. Will you do me a favour, Pete? Don’t tell Tricia it was me with the f-f-flowers, will you?”

“All right.”

“You call me when you know wh-what’s going on with the w-wedding? And the food? And the c-cake?”

“I will.” Pete said goodbye and left the house. The pick-up was still behind the corrugated iron shed. Why hadn’t Bob taken it? Right, because Pete had the keys in his pocket.

The Second Investigator drove the pick-up to the police station. Bob still hadn’t shown up there. Pete was sure that he did not drive past Bob on the way here.

In any case, Pete apologized to the annoyed Holden and drove to Hardy’s again, but Bob was not there either. Maybe he was back at the farmhouse, otherwise Pete couldn’t think of anywhere else.

The Cooper farm was in darkness. There were no lights anywhere, and no one was around.

“What’s going on?” Pete became nervous. He looked in the barn and in the stable. The horse was not there. Also, a bicycle was missing.

“Can someone please tell me where you all are?” Pete shouted into the empty house. He picked up the phone and started to call Jupe, but there was no answer.

Then he went out of the house, wandered aimlessly up and down the front yard and finally made his way to the dirt road. He noticed that Mr Rice’s light was still on. Jupiter’s report about Rice and his telescope came to mind. Pete walked up to the gate that was set back from the road. It was one of the several entrances to Rice’s property. The gate was locked, and there was no bell. Should he just climb over it?

The decision was taken away from him, because Rice was not long in coming out. Furious, he stomped out of the house and went towards Pete. “What do you want?”

“I’m looking for my friends and Miss Cooper. Do you know where they are?”

“How would I know?”

“Well…” Pete decided it was better not to mention the telescope. “You have a good view of the farm here and I thought—”

“So you thought I was going to sit by the window and spy all day as if I cared what Miss Cooper was up to.”

“I’m just saying… maybe you saw when the lights went out, or where they all went.”

“I didn’t see anything. Now go away. You better not show up here again.”

“It’s okay, it was just a question.” Pete could have guessed that Rice would not help him. He turned around angrily.

A car drove past in front of the road. The light from the headlights scanned through the cornfield. For a moment, Pete hoped that the car would turn into the dirt road and that it might be Jupiter, Bob and Tricia. However, the car continued on towards Deep Spring. Nevertheless, Pete stopped. He walked back a few metres and stared intently in the direction of the road.

“You’re still on my property,” Rice said, still standing impatiently at the gate. “Get lost!”

“Say, Mr Rice, you’re standing right where you were around noon today when Tricia’s dog was taken. I notice that you have a view of a part of the road from here. You should have seen the car that turned around so suddenly and drove off.”

Rice shook his head in amusement. “The things I’m supposed to have seen.”

“Did you see a car or not?”

Rice jutted his chin out defiantly. “Yes, I did.”

“What kind of car was that?”

“Why should I tell you?”

“Because Miss Cooper’s dog has been abducted.”

Rice laughed. “And you think I care?”

“Now listen! It’s not the dog’s fault that you’re fighting with your neighbour.”

“And it’s not my fault that I don’t remember that car at all.” Mr Rice insisted.

Suddenly, Pete lost his patience… but an idea came to him. “Now I’ll tell you what I remember, namely the telescope that stands at your window and with which you constantly spy on the Cooper farm.”

Rice froze. “Excuse me?”

“Are you deaf?”

“Nonsense.”

“Not so. We were watching you from our room.”

“That would only be possible if you yourselves were a—” Rice fell silent as he realized that this had not been the cleverest retort.

Pete felt himself getting the upper hand. What would Jupiter do now? Bluff, probably. “We have photos where you can be clearly seen in your nightgown.”

Rice opened his mouth and closed it again. “This is illegal what you are doing!” He made a pitiful attempt to turn the tables.

“I don’t care,” Pete said. “I’ll print out the photos and distribute them all over Deep Spring if you don’t tell me what you saw.”

“You don’t—” Rice began, half threatening, half pleading.

“—If you tell me immediately what you saw,” Pete repeated. “Well?”

Mr Rice swallowed. “It was a white Toyota Camry.”

“What more?”

“Nothing more.”

“The driver?”

“I couldn’t recognize him. I really couldn’t. Listen, kid, you’re not to go to Miss Cooper with those… those photos, do you hear me?”

“Oh no?”

“No, because… I have helped you now and…”

“I’ll think about it,” Pete said and after a moment’s hesitation, he added: “—If you’re nice to Tricia from now on.”

He turned and returned to the Cooper farm with a smile.

The elation of having gained the upper hand over Mr Rice only carried Pete through the next few minutes, because there was still no trace of Jupiter, Bob and Tricia. What should he do now?

He went into the kitchen and raided the fridge, because he still hadn’t had anything to eat. Then he heard hoof beats from outside. Pete hurried to the window.

In the pale moonlight, Tricia rode Silver along the dirt road. Next to her, Jupiter was cycling on his squeaky bike. It was an unreal scene.

Pete stormed out. “There you are at last! Tell me, are you crazy, Jupe? Running off like that?”

“Sorry, Pete, I was in a hurry,” Jupiter apologized and dismounted. “I had written a note. Didn’t you find it?”

“No. What happened anyway?”

Jupe told him in short sentences while Tricia took Silver to the stable.

“Then Johnson has nothing to do with the whole thing?”

“No, that was a false trail.”

“Interesting,” said Pete. “For a short time, we had a completely new suspicion, but it quickly squashed.”

Pete then reported on his encounter with Nigel. However, Jupiter looked at him sceptically.

“Yes, yes, I know, we overreacted,” Pete admitted. “Sure, if you were there, you probably would have deduced from the way the paint brushes were laid out on the table that Nigel was harmless. Anyway. Bob ran off to call the police, but he never got there. I have no idea where he is. Unfortunately, he doesn’t have his mobile phone with him either.”

“Strange,” Jupiter murmured, “and disturbing. Where should Bob have gone to? There aren’t many possibilities. Deep Spring is small. If he wasn’t at the police station or Hardy’s, I can really only think of one explanation for his disappearance. He must have encountered something on his way that stopped him… something—or someone.”

“Someone in a white Toyota Camry, for example,” Pete reflected.

The First Investigator looked at him questioningly. At that moment, Tricia came into the house.

“Mr Rice saw a white Camry on the road at noon today when Trigger was abducted.”

“How do you know that?” wondered Jupiter.

“He told me.”

“Just like that?”

“I talked him into it.”

“You managed to get some information from Mr Rice?” asked Tricia. “That’s a special gift. When you get a chance you must tell me how you managed it. Don’t you think he was just bluffing you?”

“I don’t think so,” Pete answered confidently.

“Tricia, do you know anyone with a white Toyota Camry?” asked Jupiter.

She shook her head.

“Then we should keep an eye out for that car,” Jupe decided.

An hour later, Jupiter, Pete and Tricia had taken a drive through deserted Deep Spring. They had crossed every single street at least twice but without finding a trace of Bob or the Camry. By now it was late at night. It was dark behind most of the windows and Hardy's had also closed. No one was out anymore.

"That is it," Pete said as they stopped in front of The Roadhouse. "No Bob. No clues."

"We shouldn't wait any longer, but inform Holden," Tricia said. "He can let the county colleagues know so that the patrol cars in the area can be on the lookout for Bob and the Camry. Also, we can search for the car in the police computer."

Five minutes later, Chief Holden, startled from a light slumber, took his feet off the desk and blinked at Tricia and the two investigators in confusion.

"Cooper, what are you doing here?" the chief asked. "Are you here to see your fiancé? He's asleep, I think."

"It's better that way," Tricia murmured. "We are here for another reason. Bob is missing. We suspect he got too close to the dog abductor."

"How? What?"

"I want an APB. I know Bob hasn't actually been gone long enough, but given the circumstances…"

Holden let everything be explained to him and did not ask much. He knew he could trust Tricia. "I don't expect too much support from the sheriff," he said gloomily. "Anyway, I'll talk to him. You take care of that white Camry."

"Aye, Chief." Tricia sat down at the police computer and called up a list of all the white Toyota Camrys registered in Arizona. There were several hundred hits. Limited to the immediate area, there were still a few dozen left. Together they skimmed the names of the owners, but none of them looked familiar or even suspicious to Tricia. Frustrated, she printed out the list of names.

"And now what?" asked Pete.

"The APB is out," Chief Holden said. "All police officers in the area will be on the lookout for Bob and the car on their patrols. That's all we can do for now."

"That's not much," Pete muttered.

"As soon as the sun rises, we'll comb through Deep Spring again," Tricia said.

"Until then, you should get some sleep," the chief said. "I'm on night duty, Cooper, not you. You look exhausted, if I may say so. March off to bed with you, that's an order. We'll find Bob somehow."

15. Tricia's Secret

Back at the farm, sleep was still out of the question. Instead of going to bed, Pete, Jupiter and Tricia each sat at the kitchen table with a large cup of coffee and brooded. The coffee was bitter and did not so much drive away their tiredness as increase their inner restlessness.

Pete kept getting up and looking out of the window. Outside, a soft grey on the horizon already heralded the morning. "We can't just sit around here," the Second Investigator mumbled. "Bob and Trigger are missing. We have to do something."

"We already are," Jupiter said. "The police are looking for them and we have a list of all the Camry owners we can look up."

"—But right now we're just sitting around," Pete countered.

"We're thinking," Jupiter objected, "at least, I am."

"Oh yeah? About what?"

"About the motive of the perpetrator. I was just thinking how the flickering light at night in the rock maze fits into this story. I'll tell you—not at all. Basically, we have no theory in which all the events fit logically."

"You are our mastermind, Jupe," said the Second Investigator. "If you can't think of anything, you don't expect anything from us."

"Is that so?"

"Not from me, anyway."

Jupiter looked at Tricia, who was staring into her coffee cup, lost in thought. She did not seem to have been listening. She looked up questioningly. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Tricia, I was just wondering what you actually know about this case," Jupe said.

"What do you mean?"

"Someone has abducted your dog. You were also involved in the flickering light incident at the rock maze… and then there were the break-ins here at the farm. You are obviously the lynch pin of these incidents. It's only logical to assume that if there is one person who should be able to see through the connections, it will be you."

"What are you saying?"

"Tricia, you're hiding something from us. In the barn the day before yesterday, something happened that changed you. You tried to hide it from everyone, but you didn't do a very good job. You've been electrified ever since… and I don't think it has anything to do with the wedding. Trigger and Bob are missing, and they may be in danger. I think it's time to tell us the truth."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Tricia stood up and put the empty coffee mug in the dishwasher. Then she started wiping the kitchen top with a damp cloth, turning her back on Jupiter.

"I don't believe you," Jupe continued. "Do you want me to give you a hint? It has something to do with the medicine you hide in your yoga room."

Tricia turned around angrily. "You were in my yoga room? How dare you?"

The First Investigator was not intimidated. "I am taking the liberty of solving this case that may be putting the lives of your dog and my friend in danger," he said sternly. "What happened in the barn? And what does it have to do with that medication you took right after?

Deconvulsan. I would have looked up what that is for, but I haven't had a chance. I know that '*convulsio*' is Latin for 'convulsion' which means 'a sudden, violent, and irregular movement of the body'. Will you tell me what you take it for, or shall I go to the street where I have reception and look it up myself?"

"You have no right to do that," Tricia pressed out between clenched teeth. She had gone pale. "None of this is any of you cheeky boys' business."

Pete was startled. "Tricia!"

"You really meddle in everything, don't you?" Her eyes flashed with anger. "Leave me alone! Just get out of here!"

Suddenly Tricia's head tilted back and her eyes rolled upwards until only the whites were visible. She stretched her arms, her whole body stiffened like a board and she was about to fall over.

"Tricia!" Pete jumped up quickly and caught her before she hit the floor. Carefully, he laid her down. Tricia's jaw was clenched tightly. Her whole body tensed, but she did not respond.

"Tricia, what's wrong with you? Jupe! Do something!" Pete wanted to help, but didn't know how.

"She's having a seizure," Jupiter said, no less startled.

"Her lips are turning blue. Jupe, she doesn't seem to be breathing."

Tricia's arms and legs began to twitch in a slow rhythm.

"We have to call an ambulance!" Pete jumped up and wanted to run to the phone, but Jupiter held him by the arm.

"Wait, Pete."

"Wait? Are you stupid? For what?"

While Pete watched the uncontrolled twitching in horror, Jupiter knelt down next to Tricia and talked to her soothingly: "It's all right, Tricia, nothing will happen to you."

The twitching slowed down as Tricia's breathing resumed. After a few seconds, her whole body went limp and her eyes closed as if in sleep. Her lips returned to their normal colour.

"She's relaxing," Jupiter noted with relief.

"What was that?" asked Pete anxiously.

Jupiter did not answer, but continued to talk soothingly to Tricia until she opened her eyes, fluttering. It took a few seconds for her to regain consciousness.

"What…" She realized she was lying on the floor. "Oh."

Groaning, she tried to sit up.

"Lie still," Jupiter said, taking a cushion from the kitchen chair and placing it under her head.

Tricia sighed gratefully and closed her eyes.

"What was that?" asked Pete. "What just happened there?"

"An epileptic seizure," Jupiter said. "It's a neurological disorder in the brain. Such seizures occur in a wide variety of forms and can basically affect anyone. As I know, epilepsy is more common than most suspect."

"This can affect anyone?" Pete repeated. "From the looks of it, that's life-threatening."

"The seizures as such are unpleasant, but as far as I know, it's not life-threatening," Jupe explained. "However, they can cause people to fall and hit their head or suffer a serious injury."

"She would have hit her head on the floor if I hadn't caught her," Pete said worriedly, "but then, she wasn't breathing."

"Only for a few seconds."

"What is happening now? Is Tricia in a coma?"

"No. She is asleep. It's a normal reaction of the body to the considerable strain resulting from the seizure. It may be that she is sleeping now until morning, but it's just as possible that she'll wake up again at any moment."

"Konrad… was not exaggerating… in his praises… of your encyclopaedic knowledge…" Tricia murmured and opened her eyes. She propped herself up to pull herself together.

"Tricia, stay down," Pete said worriedly.

"It's all right. I always sleep very briefly."

"That means you've had this before?" Pete wondered.

She nodded and let the boys help her up. Exhausted, she sat down at the kitchen table. "On cue this time. Don't look at me so horrified, Pete, I'm really okay. The seizure is over. Everything's all right again. I won't feel the soreness I get from the cramps until tomorrow."

"So you suffer from epilepsy," Jupiter stated in a matter-of-fact manner.

"I guess there's little point in denying it now." Tricia looked up. Briefly she seemed to wrestle with herself whether to reveal more. Then she gave herself a jolt. "I had my first epileptic seizure when I was a teenager, and from then on, regularly. As you said, Jupiter, this disease can affect anyone. I always only realize it has happened when I wake up from it. Fortunately there are medicines that suppress the seizures. I haven't had a seizure for years… until two days ago."

"The incident in the barn," Jupiter guessed.

She nodded. "When I entered the barn, everything was still normal. Then I saw the corn husk dolls under the ceiling. Suddenly Trigger started whimpering. I was very surprised but then realized what I was in for. I immediately closed and locked the barn door. The next thing I remembered was waking up on the ground."

"Wait a minute, I'm not quite following you," Pete interrupted her. "Trigger? What has he got to do with it?"

"Trigger is a seizure-alert dog, am I right?" Jupiter suspected.

"A what?" Pete asked.

Tricia nodded with a smile. "Of course Jupiter Jones is also aware of this. These are dogs that have the ability to sense a person's impending seizure before the person has any inkling of it. It is a natural instinct of certain dogs, and is something that cannot be trained. However, the dog can be trained to alert a person of an oncoming seizure. This warning gives the person time to take precautions such as lying down or leaving crowded environments. It can also help to prevent serious injuries.

"Trigger came into my life twelve years ago. Back then, I was still suffering from regular seizures. For the next two years, Trigger has helped me tremendously by giving me warning signs. After I took the medication, I have had no seizures until two days ago… so it was the first time in ten years. In the barn, I wanted to avoid you witnessing my seizure at all costs."

"So that explains your strange behaviour that day," Jupiter said.

Tricia nodded. "I was totally shocked and I had to process that first."

"Now I realize a few things." Thoughtfully, the First Investigator pinched his lower lip. "Actually, I'm realizing quite a lot. Trigger can warn you about a seizure. Isn't it possible that that's exactly why he was abducted… so that he just couldn't do that anymore? And the flickering light at the top of Maze Hill… As far as I know, flickering lights can set off seizures for epileptics. That's why there are warnings about certain movies or computer games or things like that. Did someone try to provoke a seizure in you that night?"

Tricia's eyes narrowed. "I've thought about it too… but it doesn't make sense, because no one knows about my condition. Besides, flickering light does not affect every epileptic… not for me, for example. I have never reacted to it. Stress and lack of sleep are much more decisive factors for me."

"Lack of sleep…" Pete repeated. "The late-night phone calls… Someone might have been trying to disturb your sleep."

"The signs are increasing that someone might know after all," Jupiter concluded.

"After the barn incident, I was afraid that it could happen again at any time, despite the medication. Then, when Trigger went missing, it was clear to me that I had to take matters into my own hands immediately before everything slipped away. Therefore, without hesitation, I went to look for Johnson. I didn't know if he was really behind it, but I had to do something to… to get a grip on the situation."

"You said you wanted to avoid anyone finding out about your condition at all costs," Jupiter said, "but why the secrecy at all? If I understand correctly, not even Konrad knows about it. Why not? There's no shame in it, is there? It's a disease that you have very much under control. So what's the problem?"

Tricia sighed. "My job is the problem. I shouldn't really be a police officer… at least not if I suffer from seizures regularly. I'm not allowed to drive a car because I endanger myself and others should I have a seizure at the wheel, not to mention carrying a weapon.

"After the medication kicked in, I kept quiet about my condition and decided to sign up for police training. I really wanted to become a police officer, and I was determined not to let this stupid disease rule my life."

"And now you are afraid it would all blow up and you would lose your job." Jupiter took a deep breath. "Tricia, I can understand that—but it isn't right."

Tricia stuck her index finger in the air. "Objection, your honour. After being seizure-free for such a long time, I should be allowed to practise my profession. Yes, I was afraid they wouldn't even admit me if I told the truth… but as you can see, I assessed the situation correctly—at least until the day before yesterday, when the medication suddenly stopped working."

"The medication," Jupiter repeated thoughtfully. "You took them regularly?"

"Absolutely regular. If I didn't always have to take those tablets, I could easily forget that I have this disease."

"The two break-ins," Jupiter continued, "the intruder… A week ago an intruder was here in the house. Nothing was stolen. What if he had switched the *Deconvulsan*? What if, for a week, you've been on medication that had no effect at all? That would explain why you suddenly had an epileptic seizure triggered by a moment of stress. Add to that the flickering lights, the nightly phone calls, and Trigger's abduction, the intruder must know about your condition—maybe not in all the details, or he wouldn't have tried the flickering light thing on Maze Hill. Everything else points to only this one conclusion—someone knows about your epilepsy and wants to expose you. Who comes to mind?"

"No one," Tricia affirmed. "All right, my mother knows, of course. My parents separated early and I lived with my mother in Flagstaff, where I also did my education. I only moved to the farm after my father died. So no one in Deep Spring ever knew. I only told Katie because she's my best friend. No one else."

"Could Katie have told someone else?"

"No… out of the question."

"Are you very sure of this?"

"Absolutely sure."

“—But someone is behind these attacks, Tricia,” Jupiter said seriously. “Someone must know about it, and that someone must have a very strong motive. Who would benefit from your secret coming to light? And why didn’t that someone just come out in the open and say: ‘Sergeant Cooper suffers from epilepsy and cannot be allowed to practise her profession’?”

Jupiter lapsed into brooding silence. Tricia was also brooding.

“Sergeant Cooper…” Pete repeated. “Wait a minute! That would be a motive, wouldn’t it?”

Jupiter looked questioningly at the Second Investigator. “You speak in riddles.”

“I never thought you’d say that to me, Jupe.” Pete was amused, but quickly became serious again. “Sorry, Tricia. I have to reveal a secret and tell you the wedding present Chief Holden planned to give you.”

“How do you know what—”

“A promotion…” Pete interrupted Tricia. “Chief Holden intends to promote you at your wedding.”

“Excuse me? He told you that?”

“No. I saw the marzipan cake Holden commissioned from Nigel. On it are the words: ‘Congratulations, Lieutenant Cooper!’”

Tricia looked at Pete, puzzled. “Lieutenant Cooper?”

“I suppose you know what that means…”

“That means…” Tricia fell silent. Deep wrinkles dug into her forehead.

“Does that mean what I think it means?” Jupiter asked.

“Holden is retiring soon,” Tricia continued. “If he promotes me to lieutenant, I would be the highest-ranking police officer in Deep Spring after him. That could mean that… I would be his successor… Me!”

“—And not the person who had always assumed that he was Holden’s successor,” Jupiter added.

At once, all the pieces of the puzzle slipped into place and gave the overall picture that Jupiter had been looking for all along.

16. A Few Hours Earlier…

"Get out, Bob!" shouted Pete. "Get the police!"

The knife in Nigel's hand flashed. Bob did not hesitate. He whirled around and scrambled out of the window.

Quick, to the pick-up! The driver's door was unlocked, but as he sat inside, he realized he had no key. Pete had put it in his pocket.

"Darn it!" Bob jumped out and ran along the road. There was hardly anyone else there at this time, but a car overtook him at the next intersection. Bob tried to get the driver to stop. He just honked and drove on. "Idiot!" Bob shouted out. He had to force the next car to stop.

Bob had covered almost a kilometre when a white Toyota Camry came towards him. He ran out onto the road waving and got in the car's way. As the driver rolled down his window, Bob was taken aback.

"Sergeant Murray! You're just in time."

"Hey, Bob, are you all right?"

"No," Bob gasped, propping his hands on his thighs. "I… Pete is in danger and—"

"Get your breath first," Murray said and got out. "What's the matter?"

"Pete is in danger," Bob repeated. "It could be that we have found the dog abductor."

"What are you saying?"

"Nigel from The Roadhouse. We have to help Pete right away."

"Nigel Gordon? Are you sure?"

"No, but Nigel is threatening him with a knife."

"Where?"

"At Nigel's house."

Murray hesitated only briefly. "Get in," he said.

Relieved, Bob swung himself into the passenger seat.

"Nigel lives in Desert Drive, doesn't he?"

Bob nodded. "It's not far."

Murray drove off.

Bob was relieved to have met Tricia's colleague, of all people. He noticed that his shoelace had come loose and bent down to tie it. As he did so, his eyes fell on a pair of sneakers that Sergeant Murray had carefully stowed under the passenger seat. Bob unobtrusively turned them a little to see the logo. The shoes were from Tiger. There was also a small piece of packaging film between them—'Pooch Bits: For Healthy Teeth and Silky Fur'.

"Did you lose something?" Murray asked.

"No, no, my shoelace was just untied." Bob straightened up and smiled as harmlessly as he could at Murray. "Cool shoes."

Murray nodded curtly. "A limited edition, and they're already sold out."

Just before Desert Drive, he put on his indicator and turned onto one of the many dirt roads leading to the remote farms.

"Uh, Sergeant, Desert Drive is straight ahead."

Murray did not answer. He drove a little further and brought the car to a halt.

"What's wrong?" asked Bob. "We have to get to Pete."

Sergeant Murray pointed to the footwell. "You haven't tied your shoelace at all," he remarked.

"I… oh. Must have come undone again," Bob said and leaned forward.

Then he felt a sharp pain when something hard hit him on the neck… and he blacked out.

When Bob regained consciousness, he was lying curled up in the dark on a scratchy felt surface. His hands were cuffed behind his back. He felt that he had not been unconscious for long, but Murray had had enough time to get him into the boot of the car.

Bob tried to think clearly. Murray was the intruder and Trigger's abductor! He was also a police officer with a gun and handcuffs. There was no way that Bob could overpower him… and Jupiter and Pete had no idea where he was.

While Bob tried to comprehend the situation, the car turned off the dirt road onto a paved road. How long would the drive take? Five minutes? Five hours? Where would Murray take him? What was he going to do?

Desperately, Bob tried to get his hands on something. A jack, perhaps, that could serve him as a weapon, but how could he use it when his hands were tied behind his back? No, that wouldn't work. The only thing his hands could easily reach were his own back trouser pockets. The right one was empty and in the left one was a crumpled business card of The Three Investigators.

The car turned off. The road was now bumpier, which made Murray slow down. They were no longer on a main road. Are they approaching the destination?

Bob made effort to turn around in the narrow boot. Now his face was facing the direction of travel and his hands turned towards the boot lid. Cold night air was seeping through the small gap.

After a few more minutes, the Camry slowed down again and turned onto an even bumpier road. This was perhaps the driveway to a property. Bob pulled the business card out of his pocket and slipped it through the gap in the boot lid. The wind tore it from his fingers.

Bob was right in his assumption. Less than a minute later, the Camry stopped. Murray opened the boot.

"Get out!" the rogue policeman instructed.

For Bob, that was easier said than done with his hands tied. Eventually, Murray helped him.

When Bob was finally on his feet, he looked around. They were somewhere in the desert in front of a lonely house. It was dark behind the windows. On the short staircase leading to the entrance was a wooden ramp for a wheelchair, and in front of the main door were flower pots with cacti. Next to the house was a Mazda. "Where are we?"

"At my mother's. She is stone deaf and hardly leaves the house. So you can shout, but it won't do you any good. Listen, Bob. It wasn't part of the plan to bring you here, but what was I supposed to do? I have to stop you from doing something stupid. Believe me, I have good reasons for all this."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"I'll have to think about that. That way!" Murray spun Bob around by the shoulder and directed him past the house into the wilderness.

"Where are you taking me?" He got no answer.

Bob realized that this might be his last chance to escape. He tried—but only managed three metres. Then Murray grabbed hold of him. He didn't even have to use much strength to

stop Bob from running away. The right grip was enough. Nevertheless, there was a scuffle in the sandy ground for a few more seconds, before Bob finally gave up and let Murray lead him away like a petulant donkey.

With his gun drawn, Murray took him to a small group of rocks a good distance from the house. It was only when they were only a few metres away that Bob noticed a small shed that had been half built into the rocks. It looked like the perfect prison.

Murray opened the door. Bob heard whining before he saw a dog in the darkness. Trigger wagged his tail excitedly and wanted to jump up at Bob, but was held back by a chain.

The shed had once been used as a tool shed. Sticking out of the wooden walls were nails, hooks and rings for hanging tools and other equipment. Murray threaded the handcuffs through one of the rings on the wall and pushed a stool for Bob to sit on.

Next, the policeman took a roll of tape from his pocket and pulled off a long strip. When Bob saw that, he tried to scream. However, Murray quickly pressed the tape across Bob's mouth.

"Stay calm," Murray advised him almost sympathetically. "I've got to do this. My mother won't hear anything, but who knows, maybe the postman will come by in the morning."

Looking thoughtfully at the dog, he pulled off another strip of tape and taped Trigger's mouth shut. By the time the dog realized what was happening to him, it was too late. He whimpered desperately.

"I'll be back," Murray promised, leaving the shed and closing the door.

Bob breathed deeply through his nose. The fear of not getting enough oxygen crept up inside him and it took great willpower to slowly and calmly fill his lungs with air and not panic.

It was pitch dark in the shed. Trigger whimpered as he apparently tried to free himself from the tape. Bob felt sorry for him, but he couldn't help him.

Bob could only guess what Murray was going to do with him, but the more he thought about it, the more it became clear—Murray wouldn't let him go alive. Maybe the rogue policeman hadn't figured that out himself, but Bob saw no other option.

The hours passed. As day broke, light fell through the cracks in the wooden wall. Some of these were wide enough to see through. Bob had a good view of the surroundings and the house. All was quiet there until Bob noticed movement behind the curtains.

After half an hour, Murray stepped out the door. He left the Camry where it was, took another long look in the direction of the shed and finally got into the Mazda and drove off. This was his own car, Bob thought. The Toyota probably belonged to his mother.

Slowly the sun climbed higher and drove the cold out of Bob's bones. For half an hour, the temperature was pleasant. Then it got warm… and warmer and warmer. Even Trigger, who had slept exhaustedly in between, became restless again. It was still far from noon. By evening, they would both be fried in this stuffy shed. The water bowl from which Trigger had apparently drunk was empty. Panic threatened to overtake Bob again. Then a noise made him sit up and take notice.

A vehicle approached. It was Tricia's white pick-up truck! It rolled towards the house and came to a stop.

Tricia, Pete and Jupiter got out. Bob's heart leapt. Trigger lifted his head. He sensed Tricia and tried to bark, just as Bob tried to shout. Neither of them was heard as the shed was too far from the house. However, there was hope. Somehow, his friends will find him in a moment.

The three of them went to the house first. Of course, Bob would have done the same. The door was opened for them by an old woman in a wheelchair. They talked to her. Even from a distance it was obvious that the old lady didn't understand much and everything had to be repeated aloud several times. They talked to her for two or three minutes. Pete's body language betrayed his disappointment. The three turned away, returned to the pick-up and got in.

With unprecedented horror, Bob watched as the pick-up turned and rolled away.

17. The Rescue

"It was worth a try," Jupiter said as he started the engine. Tricia and Pete squeezed into the cab next to him.

"Yeah. It wasn't a stupid idea to come out here looking for Bob," Pete said. "After all, the Camry that was registered to Murray's mother was parked outside the house."

"Obviously Murray would have used it instead of his own car to avoid recognition," Tricia said.

"I'm not sure his mother even really knew what we said to her," Pete said.

"She definitely knew not to let us in the house," Tricia noted, "but I also can't imagine Murray hiding Bob in there somewhere. The old lady should have noticed that."

"Let's hope so," Pete sighed as Jupiter turned out of the driveway onto the bumpy country road. "What are we going to do now? Back to Deep Spring?"

Tricia nodded. "It was a good decision to look for Bob first instead of confronting Murray. Who knows how he'll react… but now we do have to go to him. It's going to be awkward. I don't know yet how—"

Jupiter hit the brakes so abruptly that all three of them were thrown forward and the seatbelts clicked into place.

"Jupe!" cried Pete, startled. "What—"

Jupiter jumped out of the pick-up, picked up a small card from the road and held it up to the windscreen. It said:

"Bob's around here," Jupiter said excitedly. "We're turning back!"

He turned so fast that dust and sand were whirled up.

The name 'Craig' was written below the doorbell next to the front door. Sergeant Murray's mother had a different surname from her son. The white Camry was registered under the name 'Craig', which was why Tricia did not spot it when she went through the list of cars. She had only remembered the name after Murray had come to the fore as the perpetrator.

As before, it took a while before the squeak of the wheelchair could be heard from inside the house. Murray's mother opened the door and blinked at them through thick glasses. She was annoyed. "What do you want again?"

"I apologize for disturbing you again," Tricia said politely and loudly, "but the situation has changed." She pulled her police ID out of her pocket and held it out to the old lady.

“Deep Spring Police Department. Please let us in. We’d like to take a quick look around your place. It won’t take long.”

“Excuse me?”

“It won’t take long!” Tricia repeated even louder. “Let us in!”

“No,” said Murray’s mother. Her wrinkled face contorted angrily. “You’re from Deep Spring. You have no authority here and no warrant.”

Jupiter was amazed at how well-informed the lady was, as if someone had prepared her for such a situation. He peered inside the house, trying to spot tell-tale signs inside.

On the wall by the front door hung a framed faded family photo. Mother, father, son—the son was obviously Sergeant Murray. The father wore a police uniform with a chief’s badge.

While Jupiter looked at the photo and Tricia continued talking with the old lady, Pete wandered outside the house, walking past faded garden furniture, bins and an unkempt herb garden. He looked around, hoping to find another business card on the ground. Instead, he found something else.

“Over here!” Pete shouted and waved the two of them over.

Next to two tyre tracks, someone had drawn a question mark in the sand with a stick or perhaps the tip of a shoe. It was not perfect, but clearly visible. Footprints led from here into the wilderness. The Second Investigator followed them with his gaze and spotted a small wooden shed between some distant rocks that he had not noticed before.

Jupiter and Tricia were already on their way to him, while Murray’s mother remained inside her house. No one paid any more attention to her. Pete ran off. He reached the shed first and opened the unlocked door.

“Bob! Thank goodness!”

Bob looked terrible, but after Pete had carefully pulled the tape from his mouth, only relief spoke from his face. “Pete… water…”

The Second Investigator looked out of the shed and shouted: “I found Bob and Trigger! Jupe, get some drinking water! Quick!”

“Hold on, Bob! I’ll untie you!” Pete turned back to his friend. “Wait a minute! These are handcuffs. I can’t unlock them. Oh, Trigger! Hold on, I’ll release you, you poor thing!”

Pete quickly removed the tape around Trigger’s mouth and separated the chain from his collar. Whimpering gratefully, Trigger licked the Second Investigator’s hand. When Tricia reached the doorway, Trigger trotted towards her with the last of his strength. His legs buckled as he tried to jump up on her. Sobbing, Tricia went down on her knees and embraced her dog.

The next moment, Jupiter came back with a bottle of water from the pick-up. He carefully put it to Bob’s lips.

“Thank you,” Bob gasped after drinking half the bottle. Jupe gave Trigger the other half.

“How did you find me?” Bob mumbled.

“Jupe noticed our business card on the road,” Pete replied. “It was lucky he did because I would have missed it. Tricia, do you happen to have a key for these handcuffs?”

Tricia could barely break away from Trigger, but after realizing Bob’s predicament, she quickly stood up. “Just a minute, I—”

“Forget it, Cooper.”

Pete, Jupiter and Tricia whirled around. Trigger barked. Sergeant Murray was standing in the doorway in the bright backlight.

“Murray,” Tricia pressed out angrily and drew her gun faster than The Three Investigators could see.

“Drop it!” Murray ordered her. He had his gun up at the same moment and was pointing it at Tricia.

“What are you trying to do now, Murray?” asked Tricia mockingly. “Are you going to shoot us all? I’m the better of the two of us at the shooting range… as I am at most other things. Why do you think Holden wants me to take over? Yeah, you’d be surprised. I know all about it, and I know your motives. You can’t stand that I should be promoted and not you.”

Murray shook his head vigorously. “You got it wrong, Sergeant. The only thing I have a problem with is when medically unfit police officers continue to serve. You’re a danger to your profession, Cooper, and you know it is an offence by concealing your disease.”

Tricia nodded with a smile. “That’s true, but that’s not what you’re about. You want to be chief of police—to make mummy proud of you. You’re pathetic!”

“Why don’t you just tell Chief Holden what you know?” asked Jupiter. “What was all that circus about exchanging the medication, abducting the dog and so on?”

Murray laughed bitterly. “Holden would never forgive me if I discredited his favourite police officer. He would hold that against me to the end of my days. That’s why he has to find out the truth for himself and see what his little princess really is—an irresponsible criminal.”

“Put the gun down, Murray,” Tricia said. “I’m warning you, I’m going to shoot. You can count on it!”

Out from nowhere, a slender figure reared up behind Murray. Before the sergeant could react, a broomstick whacked down hard on his right forearm. Murray screamed in pain and dropped his gun before clutching the forearm with his left hand and going down on his knees. The figure quickly kicked the weapon away.

With lightning speed, Tricia grasped her gun with both hands and pointed it at Murray. “Don’t try anything, Murray or I’ll shoot,” she called out. “Pete, search him for the handcuff keys! Try the back pocket.”

Pete found the keys from Murray’s back pocket. The rogue sergeant did not respond as he was still writhing in pain on the ground. The Second Investigator freed Bob before Tricia took the handcuffs and snapped them around Murray’s wrists.

“The guy broke my arm!” wailed Murray.

“Be glad it was only the arm,” the stranger growled.

Only now did Tricia and The Three Investigators take a closer look at the newcomer. In fact, he was not a stranger at all. Tricia could hardly believe her eyes. “Mr Johnson?”

Despite the tattoos on his face, they had not recognized him at first. He had cut off his shaggy beard and was clean-shaven.

“Sergeant Cooper.” Johnson nodded at her and tried to take in the confusing situation with Murray kneeling on the floor moaning, The Three Investigators and the whimpering dog.

“You… saved us,” Tricia said with some astonishment. “I’m out of my depth. How come you are here?”

Johnson nodded curtly. “I’ll try to be brief. After our encounter last night, I didn’t go to Silverstone as planned, but back home. I thought about everything again calmly and came to the conclusion that I want to believe you… and that I will not report your fiancé. In my situation, it can’t hurt to have an ally in the police. That’s exactly what I wanted to talk to you about, but you weren’t at the farm. I assumed you were at the police station, so I went there.

“As I was about to get out of the car there, this gentleman left the building.” He pointed at Murray. “I recognized him immediately. It was the fellow who had been in my house the

night I returned and stole my dolls. He seemed to be in a big hurry and jumped into a car. Luckily he didn't see me. I followed him here, saw what happened, and—here I am."

"But where did you get the car for the pursuit?" asked Jupiter, puzzled.

"At the farm, I met someone with a rental car." Johnson turned around.

A broad-shouldered man in a lumberjack shirt approached them.

Tricia blinked against the bright sunlight. "Konrad?" she asked incredulously.

"Not quite," Pete corrected her as he now recognized the man. "It's Hans!"

Konrad's brother was already laughing from a distance. "Jupiter, Pete and Bob! How you have grown up! And Tricia! Are you all hokay?" He eyed Sergeant Murray suspiciously. "What about this guy here? Did he do something to you? You want me to beat him up?"

"No, no, everything's under control," Tricia said quickly. "What is it with you Schmids always wanting to beat people up?" She fell around her almost-brother-in-law's neck.

"Hans, what are you doing here?" asked Pete.

"Well, what do you think? I am here for my brother's wedding. When my plane landed, I got a message on my phone that the wedding was cancelled. I want to find out why so I came straight here—to Deep Spring. When I reached the farm, only Mr Johnson was there. He asked me to take him to the police station."

"I never thought I would actually get to pursue another car," Johnson said.

Hans had to laugh. "I know The Three Investigators for a long time. I know how they work."

"Well done, Hans," Jupiter said with relief and patted him on the shoulder.

"I must say, the rescue came at the right time," Tricia said, looking Johnson long and searchingly in the eyes. "I don't know if I can ever forget what happened back then, but now I know for sure that you deserve a second chance."

Johnson nodded. "That's all I ever wanted."

18. “Let’s Celebrate Anyway!”

Chief Holden was informed. He was there ten minutes later and immediately arrested Murray under his mother’s loud protest and took him to the station. Hans drove Johnson home while The Three Investigators, Tricia and Trigger made their way back to the Cooper farm.

To their surprise, several cars were parked in front of the farmhouse. On the verandah, about a dozen people turned their heads curiously as the pick-up rolled onto the property.

A small, sturdy woman with flaming red hair and dressed in a beaded costume jumped up and ran towards them. “There you are at last, Patricia!”

“Mum! What are you doing here?”

“What am I doing here? Are you serious?”

The Three Investigators did not hear the rest of the conversation between mother and daughter, because Mathilda Jones was now coming down the verandah stairs accompanied by Uncle Titus. “Jupiter Jones! What’s going on here?”

“Aunt Mathilda…”

“Why didn’t you answer your phone? We’ve been trying to reach you since yesterday.”

“And that’s why you came all the way here?”

“Of course not! We’re here for the wedding!”

“But it’s cancelled.”

“Maybe, but we were so looking forward to seeing Hans again that we just came here anyway. Now you have to explain to us what’s actually going on.”

Before that could happen, however, Hans returned in his rental car. He was accompanied by his cousin Anna Schmid, whom he had picked up on his way back from the train station.

Aunt Mathilda forgot for a moment that she wanted to be strict with Jupiter and shed a few tears of joy as she hugged Hans and patted his cheek like a schoolboy. She had to stand on her tiptoes for that.

Hans then introduced his cousin to Aunt Mathilda. Anna was a tall woman with thick blond braids which were wound around her head. The Three Investigators knew her from a previous case.

Tricia’s mother, the Jones couple and Anna were not the only ones who had come despite the wedding cancellation. Most of them were friends and relatives of Tricia, who looked rather confused.

Meanwhile, Pete and Bob brought Trigger into the house to feed him. When they stepped outside again, the next unannounced visitor arrived. A police van drove up. Chief Holden and Katie got out of the vehicle. The chief beckoned Tricia and The Three Investigators to join him.

“Sergeant Cooper, I have to say… I’m still in shock. Not only did Sergeant Murray captured your dog and do worse, he’s ranting around the station making wild accusations against you that I’d rather not believe… but of course it’s my duty to talk to you about it.”

“I know Murray’s allegations. To make a long story short…” Tricia took a deep breath. “Chief Holden, I lied about my medical condition back when I was hired as a police officer. I have suffered from epilepsy for many years. For a long time, I had the disease well under control, but not for the past week. I have Sergeant Murray to thank for that, but it doesn’t

change the fact that I didn't tell the truth. I'm sorry. I will, of course, accept any form of disciplinary action."

Holden's expression darkened. "So you lied, Cooper. You know I can't overlook that."

"I realize that. However, I would be grateful if we could discuss all this another time. As you can see, I have guests—including some uninvited ones—so I'm afraid I'll have to take care of them."

Holden nodded curtly. "We'll talk later. For the time being, you're excused from duty—just for a few days. Not to worry, but don't get any ideas about putting your feet up. I need you, Cooper—now more than ever because I just lost a sergeant. Are we clear? Good." He looked to the verandah where the curious visitors were pretending not to be curious. "Then I'll leave you to your guests. You may need a little assistance with that, what do you think?" Holden turned his head and nodded to Katie.

Katie went to the rear of the police van and opened the door. Out came Konrad. Silently, with his shoulders slumped, he stood there like a sad dog and looked pleadingly at Tricia.

All conversations on the verandah fell silent.

"Konrad!" shouted Hans, rushing towards his brother. "*Wo hast du denn gesteckt?*"

"In jail," Konrad said just loud enough for everyone to hear.

Hans was the only one who thought it was a joke. "Did Tricia arrest you?"

Konrad nodded.

Tricia turned to The Three Investigators. "Now I could really use your help. I can't send the mob away. Can you keep them happy for a while?"

The Three Investigators nodded in agreement.

"Thank you. Meanwhile, I'll take care of my… friend." She walked over to Konrad and took him by the hand. "Shall we go for a walk?"

Konrad nodded and off they went.

Pete turned to the verandah and called out: "Would anyone like a coffee first?"

A murmur of approval spread.

"A piece of cake with that would be good," cousin Anna called out, earning restrained laughter.

Pete smiled. "Luckily, I happen to know where to get one."

An hour later, Jupiter had made as many pots of coffee as it took to cater to everyone, while Pete and Bob had gone straight to Nigel's house. There they had not only picked up the marzipan cake, but had also asked Nigel to set everything in motion to cater for twenty-five guests. The three of them had carted the gas cooker, the electric hot plates, lots of pots and pans and all the supplies to the barn, where Nigel was now busy preparing the feast.

Meanwhile, the guests chatted on the verandah, trying to hide their impatience and curiosity. It was early evening when Tricia and Konrad finally returned. They walked hand in hand and smiled. Olivia Cooper sighed with relief.

"I'm really sorry you had to wait so long," Tricia called out to the group. "I'm glad you all came, even though I asked you to stay at home." She laughed. "I see there is coffee and cake, but I guess I don't have any other thing prepared." She sighed. "I'll see if I can cook us all a big pot of spaghetti."

"Not n-n-necessary," said Nigel, who had just come out of the barn in his chef's hat and apron. "Everything's under c-control. Dinner will be ready in half an hour."

"Nigel," Tricia said, smiling gratefully. "What would we do without you."

“Oh, Trish, dear,” her mother said, clapping her hands in delight. “Everything will be fine. You just need to get changed quickly! The wedding!”

Tricia shook her head with a smile. “It’s cancelled, Mum. I told you that already.”

A murmur went through the crowd of guests.

“But…” Olivia Cooper’s gaze wandered back and forth between her daughter and Konrad. “—But I can see you two have made up.”

“We did… but that doesn’t mean we have to get married. It was all a bit too much in a bit too little time. It can’t hurt if we both… learn a little more about each other.”

Tricia’s mother made a face as if she had just lost everything, but Tricia didn’t let that unsettle her in the least. “Let’s celebrate anyway!” she called out to her guests. “How about my birthday? May I ask you to join us in our ballroom?”

The converted barn evoked much enthusiasm. Gradually, the guests digested the shock that there really was no wedding. The champagne that Hans poured helped. As the sun set and Nigel served the food in the warm glow of the lanterns, the mood was relaxed. Since the DJ had been cancelled, Bob put on the music himself.

So it turned out to be a wonderful celebration after all. It was a wedding celebration without a wedding, and perhaps that was why it was so special.

Although half the guests didn’t come, Tricia didn’t miss people like Uncle Carl and Aunt Ruth. Eventually even Mr Rice turned up and, to Tricia’s and Konrad’s utter amazement, presented the couple with a bouquet of carnations, accompanied by a half-heartedly muttered apology. He had perhaps overreacted a little in the last few days and really just wanted to be good neighbours. Pete smiled quietly to himself.

After refreshing up, Tricia and Konrad joined the party, both still exhilarated by the events of the day. With Officer Katie Parker and The Three Investigators, they formed an exclusive club of those who knew the whole story.

Hans also knew. Konrad had let him in on everything with Tricia’s consent. As they stood together like a group of conspirators in front of the barn while the others danced boisterously inside, Hans still had a few questions: “Tricia, I understand what Murray has done to… well… but how did he find out about your disease in the first place?”

“Probably through me,” Katie replied. “Tricia and I often spoke on the phone when there was nothing going on at the station and when she was off duty. I was always careful not to blab, but I also assumed that Murray was far too engrossed in writing his reports to hear anything about my private conversations. Instead, he apparently had ears like rhubarb leaves the whole time and overheard more than I suspected. I remember a conversation with you, Tricia… uh… over a month or so ago, where we talked about your epilepsy. I think he picked up something there.”

Tricia nodded. “It coincided with the first break-in here at the farm. Murray must have been so excited at the thought of being able to pin something on me that he got in here. He probably wanted to make sure it was true. Then in the yoga room he must have found my medication.”

“After that, however, a few more weeks passed, during which he did not know what to do with this information,” Jupiter added.

“—Until he overheard that Sergeant Cooper was going to be promoted,” Holden grumbled. “He probably read my e-mail correspondence with the authorities.”

“Then there was the e-mail from the sheriff’s office about Johnson’s parole,” Jupiter continued. “Murray was the first to see it and suddenly he knew what he had to do. He kept the e-mail a secret so that he could use Geronimo Johnson as a scapegoat for his crime. That involved planting corn husk dolls he stole from Johnson’s workshop.

“He broke into Tricia’s house again, changed the medication, and a few days later tried to induce a seizure in Tricia using the strobe light at Maze Hill. When this did not happen, he made sure that Tricia was constantly tense and overtired with nightly phone calls. He admitted to stealing the two large dolls from Johnson’s workshop and hanging them in the barn to inflict more trauma on Tricia. They were the best conditions for an epileptic seizure. Ideally, of course, the seizure should happen in your presence, Chief.”

“Instead, it happened in my barn with no witnesses,” Tricia added.

“One thing is not clear to me though,” Pete said. “How did Murray capture Trigger? He was at the police station at the time, wasn’t he? You were on the phone with him, Tricia.”

“It was a red herring,” Katie took over. “Murray confessed that he was really standing in the cornfield with his mobile phone. While he was talking to Tricia, he lured Trigger to him with the dog treats.”

“That’s why the connection was so bad,” Tricia recalled. “I thought it was because of a broken headset at the police station.”

“Oh, here you are!” Aunt Mathilda interrupted the conversation when she suddenly came out of the barn. She had an empty champagne glass in her hand and swayed slightly. “Come on, everyone, we don’t get together this young! I want to dance with you now!”

“Oh no!” Pete muttered, trying to hide behind Bob.

“Not with you Pete, I want to dance with a man!” Aunt Mathilda stumbled, held onto Konrad and then hooked up with him and Hans. “—Or with two. Let’s go!” She pulled the two brothers into the barn, where the automatic song selection Bob had set had just decided on a square dance.

Neither Aunt Mathilda nor Hans nor Konrad had any idea how to square dance… but they tried.